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Manipulating the New Hampshire Mail:

Political Power and the American Postal Service, 1792-1829

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Honors in History Candidate

Professor Lepler

April 28, 2019

Acknowledgments

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My last thank you must go to my family, particularly to my mom. I have been hearing about the modern post office from you for years, and I expect that you never thought that you would hear about the history of the post office from me. You have always been in my corner, cheering me on through everything that I have accomplished. You've always told me that the world is my oyster, and I've been incredibly lucky to find that my oyster has a pearl.

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Table of Contents

<u>Introduction</u>	5
<u>Chapter One: The Post Office at the Port</u>	13
<u>Chapter Two: Developing the System</u>	36
<u>Chapter Three: Losing Office</u>	59
<u>Conclusion</u>	77
<u>Bibliography</u>	81

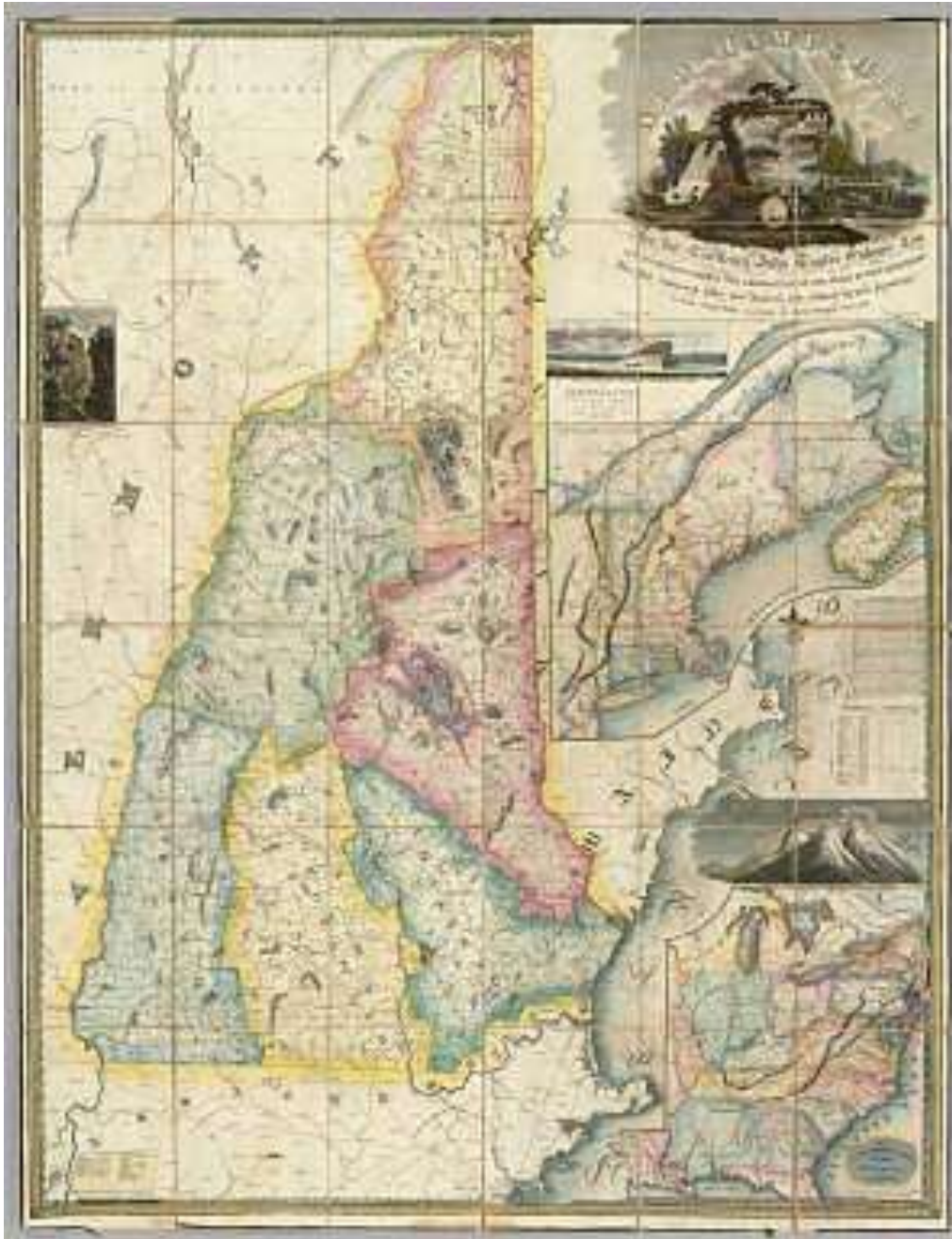


Figure 1. The Carrigain Map, 1816

Philip Carrigain, Secretary of State for the State of New Hampshire from 1805-1808, compiled this as the first official map of the entire state of New Hampshire. It was first published in 1816 and includes schools, courthouses, meeting houses, factories and mills. (image from Cartography Associates *David Rumsey Map Collection* <http://www.davidrumsey.com/maps3162.html>)

Introduction: The Postal Past

Postage is not something that is generally equated with power. People don't talk about post roads or mail contracts in the newspaper anymore. Reading an actual, physical newspaper has started to become an antiquated activity, relegated to the older generations and to the technologically challenged. With the advent of the internet, social media, and new technology, basic interpersonal communication has changed dramatically. Messages that only a few years ago would have taken days to send through the mail now take only nano-seconds after hitting the "Send" button. Yet despite all of this change, despite the progression of time and technology, universal postal service in the United States is still a key service provided by the federal government. Every citizen recognizes the white and blue eagle insignia of the United States Postal Service. Post office clerks and mail carriers are trusted members of the community. Mail and newspapers, postcards and packages are delivered to every door in America for a reasonable price. The United States Postal Service has taken many shapes over the past two hundred and forty odd years, but the prevalence of the postal system and the principle of service has always remained the same.

The first official colonial mail service was established in Boston in 1639. The General Court established one tavern as the place where letters going overseas could be dropped off and letters coming to the colony could be picked up. Other attempts at connecting the colonies with a postal system lasted for only brief amounts of time over the next fifty-three years, but in 1692 the British Crown granted Thomas Neale a twenty one year monopoly over postal operations in the North American colonies. Neale never visited the colonies, so he appointed a Deputy Postmaster General who ran the service. Neale died in 1699, and in 1707 the British government bought the rights to the service from Neale's beneficiaries. A Deputy Postmaster General continued to

manage the new government operated service, the most notable of which was none other than Benjamin Franklin. Franklin was appointed as a joint Deputy Postmaster General in 1753, sharing the position with William Hunter of Virginia, and was removed from his position in 1774 for his sympathy to the rebellious colonial cause.¹

During the period between Benjamin Franklin's removal in 1774 and the establishment of a postal service by the Continental Congress in July 1775, newspaper printer, publisher, and former postmaster William Goddard operated a Constitutional Post that encompassed thirty offices at the height of its service. The system was based on subscriptions from each colony, with offices spanning from Portsmouth, New Hampshire to Williamsburg, Virginia. The goal of this service was to protect the privacy of the mail. The Continental Congress established an official postal service on July 25th, 1775, naming Benjamin Franklin as the first Postmaster General. This service mostly carried information between Congress and the American armies. A postal service was later provided for in the Articles of Confederation, giving Congress the power to create post offices and to set postage rates. In 1785 Congress allowed Postmaster General Ebenezer Hazard to contract with stagecoach companies in order to carry mail on heavily traveled routes, such as the road between Boston, Massachusetts and Portsmouth, New Hampshire. After the ratification of the Constitution in 1788, four separate postal acts were passed to temporarily renew the postal service for brief one or two year terms. It was not until 1794 that Congress officially established a permanent postal service.²

All of the early American systems, from Goddard's Constitutional Post to the service that operated under the Articles of Confederation, were very strongly based on the British postal

¹ United States Postal Service, "The United States Postal Service: An American History, 1775-2006," Pub. 100, Washington D.C.: Government Relations, 2007, 4-5.

² USPS, "The United States Postal Service: An American History, 1775-2006," 5-6.

system, something that many of the Congressmen debating the merits of a national service did not like. These men were working to build a new, republican nation out of land that had been monarchical Britain's thirteen North American colonies. The people of the fledgling United States wanted to set themselves apart from their colonial oppressors, and the distinction between the British way of doing things and the American way of doing things extended into how the mail system would work. Congress created a new mail system, still based in part upon the older British system, but also based upon newer ideas and customs. The Congressional move away from the British system was, in fact, important at this point in time, but of even more importance was the question of power. Who would wield power over this new, American postal system? This question causes the researcher to ask the related question: how did postal power factor into early American politics? This goal of this thesis is to attempt to answer these questions.

The history of the Postal Service has, in all honestly, been somewhat neglected. The history of the postal service has played a key role in many larger works, as it does in Brian Balogh's *A Government Out of Sight: The Mystery of National Authority in Nineteenth Century America*, but stand-alone scholarship about history of the postal service is less common. Many of the historians who have, in fact, taken on this Herculean task attribute this lack of attention to the sheer size of the undertaking. Due to the size of the organization, the volume of records, and the geographic diversity of sources, researchers face issues of time and space when contemplating such an undertaking. This work, therefore, is deeply indebted to the hardy souls who have overcome these issues and published books and articles focusing on the history and context of the American postal service.

Historian Gerald Cullinan authored one of these key texts, his book *The United States Postal Service*. This 1973 edition was actually a revision of one of his older works, *The Post*

Office Department, which was published in 1968. These volumes created historical bookends for the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970, which fundamentally changed the structure of the American postal apparatus. Cullinan's work helped to piece together the history of the institution, contextualizing the "current" shape and size of a critical service that most Americans were oblivious to. Historian Wayne E. Fuller also explored the broader history of the American postal service in his 1972 book *The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life*, but his goal was to navigate the history of the postal system as an important aspect of American history. This work was part of The Chicago History of American Civilization series, a collection of books that dealt with chronological narratives and topical histories within American life.

The current gold standard for postal scholarship is Historian Richard R. John's book, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse*. Published in 1995, this book explored the postal service's role as an agent of social change. John looked at the functionality of the post office at the national level and at the local level, building a picture of this pivotal institution while providing context for key events that took place during the American post office's early history. From the Post Office Act of 1792 to the Sabbatarians to Andrew Jackson, *Spreading the News* offered a keenly focused study of the importance of communication in the changing American social landscape. Richard R. John's work is the cornerstone for any newer works that involve discussing the postal service, no matter how briefly they cover the topic.

In terms of local postal histories, there are only two instances where local offices are generally paid any attention. One instance is as anecdotal evidence in a larger work. Offices are mentioned in a sentence or two to provide an example of a larger concept or to demonstrate a point. Even in Richard John's fourth chapter, "The Imagined Community," post offices such as

Boston or New York were given some attention, and the smaller, individual offices that were mentioned had more to do with the men that ran them. The other instance when local offices are given individual attention is in town history books. Such was the case in Durham, New Hampshire, where an entire chapter was devoted to the post office in a town history written during the early twentieth century. This coverage of the post office generally only includes who held the office, for how long, and where the office was located during their tenure. This coverage of small town offices does not generally explore their role in the broader postal context.

This study attempts to bridge the gap between these two subject areas. National postal politics have been explored and contextualized by the characters and events of individual offices. This study aims to analyze the effects of national policies in individual New Hampshire offices as a way of lending a fresh perspective on the American postal institution. A good deal of the national picture has been gleaned from the historians who have braved the information overload that dealing with the post office can cause, and the local snapshots that each chapter offers comes in large part from new, primary source research. *Manipulating the New Hampshire Mail* attempts to blend the local and the federal, bringing these two ways of looking at the post office together in order to offer a clearer picture of what went on in American postal politics during the early nineteenth century.

From the passage of the Post Office Act of 1792 through to the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828, the United States Post Office was a key component of early American public policy. State and federal governmental relationships, intrastate municipal growth, and federal inter-branch relationships were shaped in part by the laws that created and governed the postal service. By looking at the post offices in Portsmouth, Durham, and Loudon, New Hampshire, the impact of early postal politics can be seen at the ground level. By using these three communities

as case studies, this study uses local history to contextualize state, federal, and postal politics within a thirty seven year period. Each chapter will focus on one community in particular, starting in 1792 with the passage of the new Post Office Act and the affect that this legislation had in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Any historian who studies the early history of the American postal service has to talk about this critical act. This key piece of legislation laid out how the postal system would function, what could travel as mail, and how the system was going to be regulated. Portsmouth, New Hampshire was affected by this act in many of the same ways as other communities all across the United States, but the crucial topic of post roads gave Portsmouth a critical victory over the neighboring town of Exeter, and it gave Congress a powerful victory over the state of New Hampshire.

The second chapter features the town of Durham, New Hampshire. This chapter examines how the allocation of postal power affected service. Congress expanded the post office by approving petition after petition for the designation of new post roads, but it was the Postmaster General's job to ensure that those routes were made operational. This created political tension between the Legislative branch and the Post Office, making the Postmaster General the figurehead of a system that Congress was controlling from behind the scenes. The town of Durham had an older post office that got caught up in this power struggle, essentially subsidizing the establishment and continued service to new post offices and post roads that could not produce enough revenue for their own support. By looking more closely at the postmaster of the Durham office, who was the most visible manifestation of the federal government in town, we see an entire national power structure hiding behind the face of a father, friend, neighbor, and merchant.

The third chapter focuses on the town of Loudon, New Hampshire, and the political upset of the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828. Without ever giving an official explanation, the Jackson administration replaced all postmasters who did not support the Democratic agenda. Without notice for length of service, for quality of service, or for their ability to perform the tasks of a postmaster, hundreds of men were removed from their positions for partisan political reasons. Of the three post offices operating in Loudon in 1829, two of the postmasters were removed from office and replaced. This period of postal history marked an important turning point for the service. The post office went from being a part of national politics to being a force in national politics. Loudon was one of the many, many towns that benefited from Congress' policy of approval for all post road petitions and the opening of new offices to service those post roads, but the town also fell victim to the shift in postal power away from the Legislative branch toward the Executive. Loudon experienced the growing pains of the post office transforming into a machine for political patronage.

Chapter one of this study looks at how Congress "found its legs" in the sea of power that flowed through the nation during that critical era of national creation. Chapter two follows Congress as it stretches its legs, exploring and using that new postal power to enact change and expand the system. Chapter three examines Congress' first major hurdle, their first stumbling block, with the election of Andrew Jackson and the beginning of postal political patronage. Each of these shifts in power, both subtle and obvious, are seen through the lens of three New Hampshire towns. These places provide context for the national story, grounding the politics and posturing of the era in the real places and real people that dealt with the effects. This context is crucial because as a town history written about Durham, New Hampshire stated in its opening

line, “the history of a town is woven into the history of the world. To separate it is like tearing off a piece of a garment.”³

³ Everett S. Stackpole and Lucien Thompson, *History of the Town of Durham New Hampshire (Oyster River Plantation) with Genealogical Notes*, (Concord, NH: The Rumford Press, 1913), 1:1.



Figure 2. Map of Rockingham County, New Hampshire, 1892

This map shows the town of Portsmouth, New Hampshire near the upper right hand corner. Bordered by Rye, Newington, and Greenland, Portsmouth sits at the mouth of the Piscataqua River, making it the prime location for shipping and trade. (Map by D.H. Hurd & Co. "Strafford County, NH." *Town and City Atlas of the State of New Hampshire*. [1892]:223. Held in the Milne Special Collections and Archives at the University of New Hampshire.)

Chapter One: The Post Office at the Port

Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 1792

When the United States Constitution was ratified by the State of New Hampshire in June of 1788, the document officially became the supreme law of the land. Among the clauses of Article I, Section eight was the statement that “Congress shall have the power...To establish Post Offices and post roads.”⁴ This power was granted to Congress along with the power to collect taxes, to coin money, to borrow money from other countries, to raise an army, and to declare war. Given all of the enumerated powers allotted to Congress in Article I, Section eight of the Constitution, the power to establish post offices and post roads would seem inconsequential and thoroughly uncontroversial. This provision simply gave Congress the power to set-up a mail system. It was not, however until three years after the ratification of the Constitution that Congress definitively acted upon that power.

Congress eventually passed the Post Office Act of 1792, which did not permanently establish the postal system but instead created the shape that the permanent system would take. By the time that Congress passed this piece of legislation, the coastal town of Portsmouth, New Hampshire had already had an officially designated post office for almost 100 years. Portsmouth was the most important post office in the state and would actually play a crucial role in the shaping of the Post Office Act. Portsmouth was the state’s only major seaport, but it was not the state capital. That honor was held by the nearby town of Exeter, New Hampshire. When the question arose of whether to place the town of Exeter on the main, coastal post route between Boston and Portsmouth, or on the inland cross route between Portsmouth and Concord, New Hampshire, the Congressional response shaped the power dynamic of postal regulation for

⁴ U.S. Cont. art. I §8 cl. 7. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>

decades to come. Congress chose to put Exeter on the cross route, ensuring that the merchants at Portsmouth would receive the latest news as much as a week before the state legislators as Exeter. By placing the economic interests of a few wealthy merchants in Portsmouth over the political interests of the entire State of New Hampshire, Congress firmly established its control over the shape of the postal institution, and established national dominance over the power of the individual state governments. The Post Office Act of 1792 was broadly applicable to all post offices, all post roads, and all postal employees across the nation, but it had a far more resounding impact upon the people of the State of New Hampshire.

According to historian Richard R. John in his book *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse*, it took three years for Congress to pass definitive postal legislation because at first, no one in Congress was really sure how to proceed. The Constitution had created guidelines for how the central government was supposed to take shape, and it provided each branch of government with a number of individually enumerated powers. There were new expectations for what the central government could do or provide, and Congress waited to enact legislation that definitively incorporated the Post Office until they had a better idea of their responsibilities.

When Congress did finally take action, the Act of 1792 shaped postal policy in three key ways. First, the act officially admitted newspapers to the post office on highly favorable terms. Second, it established a standard of privacy for the mail, meaning that the post office could not be used by government officials as a surveillance tool. Third, the act established procedures for the expansion of service.⁵ Richard John's assessment of the situation offered a very broad

⁵ Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 31.

interpretation of the reason for Congress' delay in establishing a permanent postal service and a broad interpretation of the ultimate impact of the Post Office Act of 1792. Historian Wayne Fuller, however, pinpointed one very specific problem that held Congress up.

Wayne Fuller, author of *The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life*, said that Congress specifically was not sure of how to use their Constitutional power to establish post roads and post offices. Should Congress keep its power to establish post roads and post offices, or was it a power that they could delegate to someone else? Fuller noted that the Act of 1792 actually established the office of the Postmaster General, something that Richard John did not examine. The act also set postage rates, and it established the rules and regulations that all post offices would have to adhere to. In Fuller's view, the Post Office Act of 1792 established all three of these material aspects of the service, but more importantly it provided three basic principles that would govern the system for years to come. Those three basic principles were: that the Post Office needed to be self- sustaining, meaning that it should not be supported by tax money or rely on Congressional provisions. The issue of self-support would eventually become an issue. The office also could not make a profit, meaning that all surplus revenue had to be sown back into the department in order to improve and extend the service. The third key principle was that Congress would keep the power to establish post roads, not the Postmaster General.⁶ In looking at the conclusions drawn by the two authors, Richard John offered a more generalized explanation of the impact that the Post Office Act of 1792 had on the American postal system. He discussed newspapers, privacy, and the new general protocols for expansion. Wayne Fuller, however, looked more in-depth at the details of the act. Fuller delved more deeply

⁶ Wayne E. Fuller, *The American Mail: Enlarger of the Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 43.

into the issue of post roads and the controversy that that topic stirred among Congressmen. Both historians included many of the same issues in their respective discussions of the Post Office Act of 1792, but Wayne Fuller ultimately came away with a much clearer analysis of the most critical part of this act: the Congressional decision on how to handle post roads.

President George Washington signed the bill on February 20th, 1792, officially turning the act into a law. The act was then published in its entirety in two separate issues of the Portsmouth, NH newspaper the *New-Hampshire Gazette*. The first half of the act was printed on March 21, 1792, and the second half was printed on March 28. In both issues the text of this act took up all four columns on the front page and at least one full column on the second page. This signified how important this legislation was; not only did it take up all the entire front page of one issue of the paper, it covered the entire front page of two issues. The first two columns and the top portion of a third were taken up by the first section of the act which outlined the congressionally approved post routes in the United States. This list started by naming the stops on the coastal route, which ran from Wiscasset, Maine to Savannah, Georgia. Portsmouth was the second stop on this route, after Portland, Maine, and was the only stop in New Hampshire. The list also included the post routes that reached west into the interior of each state, often referred to as “cross posts.” In New Hampshire, the route ran from Portsmouth through the capital at Exeter, up to Concord, then on to Hanover in the western part of the state.⁷ This section occasioned much Congressional controversy, but the rest of the act and the ensuing Congressional debates shall be analyzed before returning to this crucial topic.

⁷ “Second Congress of the United States... An Act to Establish the Post-Office and Post-Roads within the United States,” *The New Hampshire Gazette and the General Advertiser* (Portsmouth, NH). March 21, 1792.

The best way to analyze the contents of this act is to group the sections by subject rather than by section number, so the next several sections of the act that will be examined dealt specifically with who would work for the Post Office. The third section established the General Post Office, which was to be at the Seat of Government and was to be run by the Postmaster General. This Postmaster General was allowed an assistant, and had the power to appoint Deputy Postmasters in all places and post offices that had a vacancy. In the second section, the Postmaster General was granted the power to make contracts “for a term not exceeding eight years, for extending the line of posts,” with the caveat that these contracts could not detract from the overall revenue of the service.⁸ The fourth section of the act outlined the oath of office that all postal employees had to take, from the Postmaster General to every individual mail carrier. Section six again dealt with the Postmaster General establishing contracts for carrying the mail, specifically outlining the guidelines that he had to follow for advertising and documenting all contracts and proposals. Section eight outlined the compensation rates for the Postmaster General and his Assistant Postmaster General, who would receive \$2000 per year and \$1000 per year respectively.⁹ While the sections that outlined the responsibilities of the Postmaster General were near the beginning of the Post Office Act of 1792, several different sections of the act described aspects of the job that each Deputy Postmaster had to fulfill.

Scattered throughout the Post Office Act of 1792 were seven sections that dealt directly with the rules and regulations that pertained to Deputy Postmasters and their offices. Section four, which also laid out the oath of office, instructed Deputy Postmasters to submit a variety of paperwork to the Postmaster General in quarterly reports. This paperwork generally accounted

⁸ “An Act to Establish the Post-Office and Post-Roads,” March 21, 1792.

⁹ “An Act to Establish the Post-Office and Post-Roads,” March 21, 1792.

for the number of letters that went in and out of each office and the amount of postage that was taken in. Section seven ordered Deputy Postmasters to keep an office “in which one or more persons shall attend at such hours as the Post-master-General shall direct.”¹⁰ Essentially, each post master had to keep an office that was open to the public during a given number of hours or on certain days, however often the Postmaster General directed offices to be open. This section also indicated that all letters brought into the office up until one half hour before the mail departed had to be included in that particular dispatch. This provision helped to ensure that there was no withholding or delaying of the mail. Section thirteen dealt with documenting the mail brought into port by ship captains, which goes back to the paperwork mentioned above, and the compensation that postmasters needed to provide to them. Section fifteen established protocols for documenting way letters, which were mail items taken in by mail carriers and brought to the nearest post office. The final two sections that dealt directly with Deputy Postmasters were sections twenty three and twenty seven. Section twenty three outlined that the compensation that each postmaster would receive was to be a percentage of the postage that they took into their office; these percentages were graduated based on how much money an office earned. In section twenty seven, postmasters and mail carriers were exempted from militia duty, and “any fine or penalty for neglect thereof,” ensuring that the mail would always be dealt with and delivered on time.¹¹ By including many of these sections, Congress tried to ensure that post offices across the country would be run in the same, uniform fashion. Several of the topics covered above, such as postmaster compensation and postal paperwork, will be discussed in greater depth in the next two chapters.

¹⁰ “An Act to Establish the Post-Office and Post-Roads,” March 21, 1792.

¹¹ “Second Congress of the United States... An Act to Establish the Post-Office and Post-Roads within the United States,” *The New Hampshire Gazette and the General Advertiser* (Portsmouth, NH), March 28, 1792.

Of the thirty sections in this act, five of them dealt with postage rates, and two of those dealt specifically with newspapers. As was pointed out by historian Richard John, the admission of newspapers to the mail was one of the most important aspects of this act. Matters of protocol for how to handle newspapers in the mail were discussed in Congress, but most questions about newspapers revolved around postage. Representative Hugh Williamson of North Carolina proposed an amendment that, among other things, set the newspaper postage rates at: one half cent between 100 and 200 miles, one cent between 200 and 300 miles, and one and one quarter cents beyond 350 miles.¹² This amendment was met with worries of who would pay the postage on newspapers - would the printers pay, or would the subscriber – and arguments that newspaper postage rates should not be graduated. Representative Bourne objected to this amendment because “newspapers contained general information, and ought to come to the subscribers in all parts of the Union on the same terms.”¹³ There were two representatives by the name of Bourne in Congress at this time: Shearjashub Bourne of Massachusetts and Benjamin Bourne of Rhode Island. The *Annals of Congress*, however, did not specify which Representative Bourne was speaking in this instance. Whichever man it was, several of his colleagues argued against the institution of a flat rate because it would favor bigger city printers over smaller country printers, which would restrict the flow of information, and such low rates would not be sufficient to defray the overall costs. Newspapers were the best way for Congress to keep their constituents informed, so the Representatives debating the Post Office bill wanted to make them as easily accessible as possible.

¹² *Annals of the Congress of the United States*, Vol. 3. 1st Session, Second Congress, House of Representatives (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1849), 142, 283.

¹³ *The Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 142, 285.

Section twenty two of the Post Office Act provided the final figures for newspaper postage. Any newspaper that traveled up to 100 miles cost only one cent in postage, and any newspaper going more than 100 miles cost one and one half cents in postage. This pointed to a compromise between Congressmen: the newspaper rates were graduated based on distance, which would help to support subscriptions to local papers, but there were only two rates (one cent and one and one half cents) that were very low when compared to the rates for letters. Section twenty one gave printers the privilege to send one paper, free of charge, to every other printer in the United States. This measure offered yet another boost to country printers by helping to spread news quickly and easily throughout the Union.

Congressmen were not the only people that were talking about the Post Office Act in the months leading up to the passage of this crucial piece of legislation. Allusions to the public sentiment surrounding the Post Office Act of 1792 were noticeably present in the Portsmouth, New Hampshire newspapers. In the January 25, 1792 issue of the *New Hampshire Gazette*, a small poem was printed near the bottom of the front page. This poem read:

Newspapers
 THAT universal information
 Should circulate throughout the nation,
 And knowledge be as free as air,
 Our Sages all as one declare ---
 But in the bill they've fram'd, behold
 This knowledge's made as dear as gold!¹⁴

¹⁴ "Newspapers," *The New Hampshire Gazette and the General Advertiser* (Portsmouth, NH), Jan 25, 1792.

This poem shared the front page with a letter to the Clergy of the Episcopal Church, a poem from the *Farmers Journal* titled “Hath he a Fortune?”, and a notice about the settlement of a recently deceased Portsmouth man’s estate. Nowhere did the paper editor inform the reader that this poem referred to the Post Office Bill of 1792, or that the issue being discussed was the debates over the proposed newspaper postage rates. There was no context provided anywhere. This poem would, however, have made perfect sense to any citizen who was keeping abreast of the debates surrounding the postal bill, and it would have made the editor’s opinion crystal clear: newspapers should travel free of postage. Information was too important to put a (postage) price on. While information was in fact precious and universally necessary, this Portsmouth editor’s invocation of the language of liberty and equality reminds the reader that postage prices were in addition to subscription prices, so high postage prices could force people to stop taking the newspaper. While this would have been highly detrimental to the public good, it also would have been detrimental to the printer’s bottom line.

Section nine of the Post Office Act of 1792 established a graduated list of postage rates for letters conveyed over land. This list was initially proposed in Congress by Representative Williamson and had nine rates that correlated to certain distances, ranging in cost from six cents for under thirty miles to twenty five cents for more than 450 miles. This list gave the prices for a single page letter, but the rest of the section indicated that a two sheet letter was double the price, and a three sheet letter was triple the price.¹⁵ This meant that, for example, a single sheet letter going sixty five miles would cost ten cents, and a two sheet letter going the same distance would cost twenty cents. When discussing the exorbitantly high postage rates of this period, Historian Gerald Cullinan provided a price comparison for a twenty five cent, one sheet letter traveling

¹⁵ “An Act to Establish the Post-Office and Post-Roads,” March 21, 1792.

more than 450 miles. For the same amount of money that someone would use to send that letter during the late eighteenth century, they would also have been able to buy five dozen eggs, four pounds of butter, or two bushels of potatoes.¹⁶ Postage rates as high as these would have been a burden to most citizens.

During the Congressional debates regarding the postage rate of letters, one of the biggest concerns was how to best balance price and the accrual of revenue. Representative Thomas Fitzsimons of Pennsylvania proposed an amendment on December 23, 1791 that listed postage rates lower than those already in effect and lower than the rates listed in the original bill. Some Representatives worried that decreased rates would, by virtue of being less expensive, decrease postal revenues. Others worried that higher rates would result in lower revenues because people would find cheaper ways outside of the system to send their mail. Mr. Fitzsimons' amendment was eventually adopted, setting the abovementioned graduated scale for the postage of a single sheet letter.¹⁷ These high rates prohibited too much widespread use of the mail to send letters, but it did help to subsidize the inclusion of newspapers in the mail stream.

In the actual Post Office Act as it was passed into law, there were five separate sections that dealt with letters that traveled on ocean vessels. These regulations would have been very important for Portsmouth as New Hampshire's only major seaport. Section ten described the postage rates applied to letters that were carried on ships coming in to port, differentiating between letters carried on public vessels and those carried on private vessels. A letter that was carried on a public vessel incurred eight cents in postage if it was a single sheet, sixteen cents if it was a double sheet, and twenty four cents if it was a triple sheet. If a letter had been carried on

¹⁶ Gerald Cullinan, *The United States Postal Service* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 38.

¹⁷ *The Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 142, 286.

a private vessel, and arrived at the port town that it was addressed to, the letter only incurred four cents in postage. If the letter still needed to travel over land, it would then incur additional overland postage according to the list laid out in section nine. Ships could either be going American port to American port or to a foreign country; the letters were to be treated the same way. Section twenty six outlined how letters that were received in post offices and were to be sent overseas had to be formed into their own mail, sealed, and addressed to the Deputy Postmaster of the port where the ship would arrive. Every such letter immediately garnered one cent in postage, which was unusual for the time.¹⁸ Most of the mail traveled without pre-paid postage.

There were also specific procedures that had to be carried out whenever a ship carrying mail came into port. Before the vessel could make entry to the port the commander had to have any U.S. mail onboard brought directly to the postmaster. These letters had to be documented with a certificate stating the number of letters and packets received, the name of the ship, and the ship's last port of call.¹⁹ This certificate had to be included in the postmaster's half-yearly accounts. The individual who brought the letters from the ship to the office was also supposed to be compensated, unless they were from a foreign packet ship, with two cents per letter. When postmasters had to deal with letters coming in on European packet ships, they were actually afforded extra compensation for their extra services. While this last provision may not have affected Portsmouth as much as cities such as Boston or New York, Portsmouth was still a bustling port town. As far as being a town in New Hampshire, these sections pertained specifically to Portsmouth, and a slight glimmer of the implications of these sections could be seen in the Portsmouth papers.

¹⁸ "An Act to Establish the Post-Office and Post-Roads within the United States," March 28, 1792.

¹⁹ "An Act to Establish the Post-Office and Post-Roads within the United States," March 28, 1792.

One example of the Portsmouth Postmaster dealing with letters for ocean vessels could be seen on the List of Letters that was published in the *New Hampshire Spy* on October 13, 1792. The publication of a list of letters remaining in his post office was one of the many duties the postmasters fulfilled, and on this particular list was a letter addressed to one Thomas Guilfoyl, who was “on board the brig Industry at Portsmouth.”²⁰ By looking at one of the other papers published in Portsmouth around that time, it seems clear that Mr. Guilfoyl likely was not in Portsmouth at the time that this list was published. On March 3, 1792 the *Gazette* published a list of ships that had been entered or cleared by the Portsmouth Custom House. On this list was the Brig Industry, cleared by the Customs House and headed for Barbados. A similar list was published on July 12, listing the Brig Industry as entering the port of Portsmouth on its return trip from Grenada. Again, on November 7th a list was published, this time listing the Brig Industry as entering Portsmouth on its return from Antigua.²¹ It is very possible that Mr. Guilfoyl did not know that he had a letter waiting for him in Portsmouth, and it is entirely possible that this letter ended up going to the Dead Letter Office. The topic of letter lists and dead letters will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, but for now this episode in Portsmouth history provides an example of why the sections of the Post Office Act of 1792 that dealt with ship letters would have been important for the Postmaster at Portsmouth.

Moving on from ships and civilian letters, Section nineteen dealt with the franking privileges of government officers. Congressmen retained their franking privileges while Congress was in session, and as long as the letters or packets weighed less than two ounces.

²⁰ “List of Letters Remaining in the Post Office at Portsmouth, Sept 26, 1792,” *Osborne’s New Hampshire Spy* (Portsmouth, NH), Oct 13, 1792.

²¹ “Entries at the Custom-House,” *The New-Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth, NH), 3/28/1792; “Entries at the Custom-House of this District,” *NH Gazette*, 7/12/1792; “Entries at the Custom House,” *NH Gazette*, 11/7/1792.

Congress grappled with this issue of franking privileges because it allowed federal governmental officers to send and receive mail for free. Franking became a contentious topic because many people feared that it would be too often abused. The primary argument that emerged during these debates maintained that franking privileges for the members of Congress were important because they allowed members to cultivate a closer connection with their constituents. In the summary of the debates from December 16, 1791, this argument was best summarized by the statement that, “the privilege of franking was granted to the members, not as a personal advantage (for in fact it proved rather a burden) but as a benefit to their constituents, who, by means of it, derive information from those who are best qualified to give it, as they are the persons chosen to administer the General Government.”²² Many Representatives were against the total abolition of this practice, as it would have made contact with their constituents too difficult, yet they were supportive of constraining the privilege. It was stated that “the establishment of the post office is agreed to be for no other purpose than the conveyance of information into every part of the Union”, and the representatives were willing to limit their franking privileges to only the time spent in session, or to limit where franked letters could be sent to or from, or to make a specific superscription necessary on all franked mail in order to maintain free contact with the people.²³ Discussions surrounding the issue of Congressional franking continued to resurface during the time that the bill spent in Congress, but in the end the proponents of total abolition lost the debate.

Congress was not the only place where franking was being discussed; an article that was published in the *New Hampshire Gazette* in January 1792 indicated how some people in

²² *The Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 252.

²³ *The Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 253.

Portsmouth felt about giving Congress franking privileges. The article claimed that the number of free letters sent by the members of the House were equal to the number of letters that required postage, and that the number of free letters would increase as the House grew. Speaking of this practice and future Congressional growth, the article asked the rhetorical question, “will it not very much reduce the revenue of the Post-office?”²⁴ Would this reduction of revenue not obstruct the channels of information? This article expressed the very genuine fear that giving members of Congress the ability to send free letters would be too much for the system. Similar concerns over the potential abuses of the system cutting into postal revenue were discussed by Congress. This article’s fears pertained most particularly to the House, however, which was at that same time considering an Apportionment bill to decide the number of representatives that would hail from each state. Senators retaining franking privileges would not be as much of a hardship because there were only two from each state, but the growth of the House of Representatives could potentially devastate the system. This article helped to acknowledge the fact that the Post Office Act of 1792 was not being considered in a vacuum, and it indicated that ‘the people’ were worried about more than newspapers and privacy. The franking privileges of government officials continued to be a somewhat controversial topic during the next few decades, but the total abolition of the system was not achieved.

The final category that almost one third of the sections in this act fell into dealt with the penalties for committing criminal acts that involved the mail. These sections established monetary penalties, ranging from \$10 to \$500, for offenses such as obstructing the carriage of the mail, counterfeit franking, delaying or opening the mail, and detaining or destroying

²⁴ “If the amount of free letters...” *The New Hampshire Gazette and the General Advertiser* (Portsmouth, NH), Jan 11, 1792.

newspapers. Stealing from the mail and “secreting”, embezzling or destroying any letter that contained:

any bank note, or bank post bill, bill of exchange, warrant of the treasury of the United States, note of assignment of stock in the funds, letters of attorney for receiving annuities or dividends, or for selling stock in the funds, or for receiving the interest thereof, or any letter of credit, or note for, or relating to the payment of money,

would result in the perpetrator being put to death.²⁵ The goal of these sections seemed very clear: Congress wanted to ensure that the mail would be safe, and that anyone who threatened that safety would be punished. The safety of the mail would, in turn, create trust in the national system. These penalties related back to Richard John’s list of the important aspects of this act. He discussed the issues that the Founding Fathers experienced when foreign governments read their letters as a form of surveillance, so these sections of the act helped to ensure that the same thing would not happen in the United States.²⁶ Many, many of the sections in the Post Office Act aimed to ensure the privacy of the mail.

Any offense that dealt with money in the mail carried the death penalty, despite the attempts of some Congressmen to lessen the severity of the punishment for these offenses. The penalty for robbing the mail was first changed from being punishable by death to being punishable by imprisonment for life (or whatever term the court may think proper), which was then changed simply to punishment by imprisonment. Some Congressmen worried that too severe a punishment would prevent a jury conviction and would make sport of men’s lives, but other

²⁵ “An Act to Establish the Post-Office and Post-Roads,” March 28, 1792.

²⁶ Richard John, 43-44.

representatives felt that capital punishment would help to deter such depravity in the first place.²⁷ Something else that these punishments ensured was the fact that post office related crimes would be tried in federal courts, not in state courts. The General Post Office was a federal organization, but this act helped to officially maintain federal jurisdiction over all postal crimes. This kept these issues out of state courts, and reinforced the creation of a federal judiciary. These sections of this act sent a very clear message to the people of the United States: anything that entered the mail would be federally protected, meaning that it would be safely conveyed, intact, and would arrive in a relatively timely manner.

The most important aspect of the Post Office Act of 1792 was not, however, franking, regulations, or postage rates, it was actually the final Congressional decision about how to handle post roads. These other details are important for building the foundation of the system, for establishing universal federal mandates for carrying the mail within a uniform government system. The biggest issue, however, that came up during the debates surrounding the Post Office Bill was actually the question of who would have the power to designate post roads. On December 6, 1791, Representative Theodore Sedgwick of Massachusetts proposed the removal of the first section of the bill because it specifically designated the post roads. He wanted to give the power of designating post roads to the President, stating that “the members of the House could not be supposed to possess every information that might be requisite on this subject, and their opinions were liable to be biased by local interests.”²⁸ Other representatives felt that the power should instead belong to the Postmaster General. Their line of reasoning purported that one individual may know better where post roads were needed, and their decision would be more

²⁷ *The Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 287.

²⁸ *The Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 143, 229.

expedient than one made by a large group. There were many individuals in the House, however, who still felt that the power should remain with Congress.

While Representative Sedgwick argued that the members of the House could not possibly have all the information needed to decide where to put post roads, other Congressmen believed that they were the exact body to have all of the necessary knowledge for making such important decisions. Representative Thomas Hartley of Pennsylvania was perplexed by the idea that Congress, which had members representing every corner of the Union, could not possibly have enough information to make a sound judgement on where to designate the post roads. He stated that “this bill has the complexion of a perpetual law; we must have some regard to consequences,” reminding his colleagues that while they may have had great faith in their current president, they could not predict the honor and integrity of future presidents.²⁹ Giving the power to designate post roads to the President could be a huge mistake. Another concern that was raised in relation to delegating the power over post roads to the President was the fact that this would create too much work for that one man; taking on this extra responsibility would be too troublesome. Representative Sedgwick also noted that even if they did decide to keep the power to designate post roads with Congress, this bill was still experimental. It had “the complexion of a perpetual law” but if something did not work out, they could always return to the matter at the expiration of the act. This line of reasoning gained quite a bit of traction with a number of other Representatives on both sides of the debate. Representative Sedgwick’s proposal was eventually voted down, but the debate over post roads definitely did not end there.

The most significant part of this act that applied directly to Portsmouth and the entire State of New Hampshire dealt specifically with the portion of the main coastal post route that ran

²⁹ *The Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 194, 231.

through New Hampshire. When the Post Office Act of 1792 was published in the *New-Hampshire Gazette*, the town of Exeter was listed on the cross route that led into the interior of the state. When the Post Office bill first made its way from the House to the Senate, however, Exeter was on the main coastal post route, offering an intermediary stop between Boston and Portsmouth. The Senate proposed an amendment to strike Exeter off of the coastal route and to relocate it to the cross post headed into the state, so when the bill was returned to the House of Representatives with this amendment, a heated debate ensued over which route Exeter belonged on. One of the reasons given for this amendment was that the mail stage could not possibly pass from Boston to Portsmouth, by way of Exeter, in one day. Representative Nicholas Gilman of New Hampshire found this explanation to be absurd, stating that Exeter was “a compact town, of considerable trade, and some navigation; it has a direct trade with Boston, and vends considerable amounts of dry goods.”³⁰ Exeter was also the state capital, making it home to all of the state’s records and the primary point of communication between the State of New Hampshire and the General Government. He declared that putting Exeter on the cross route would mean that letters destined for the town would languish at the Portsmouth Post Office for at least six days, if not more, and that postage rates would increase by about twenty five percent. Leaving Exeter on the main route up the coast would avoid such non-sense.

Representative Samuel Livermore of New Hampshire was the main proponent of the idea that the mail could not make it from Boston to Portsmouth in one day if the post route detoured through Exeter. There were actually two different roads that the coastal post route could have taken to travel from Boston to Exeter. The first option went through Kensington, New Hampshire, which added three miles to the route that was in current use. The second option ran

³⁰ *The Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 142, 356.

through Hampton Falls, New Hampshire, and added five miles to the standard route.

Representative Livermore adamantly supported the proposal to move Exeter onto a different route because he felt that the current coastal route, which traveled through Hampton, New Hampshire, offered a better road. He worried that adding five miles to a journey that already had to cover sixty five miles in one day was just too much. Running on an inferior road would cause the mail stage to have to run at night, inconveniencing the passengers and causing the mail to arrive late at Portsmouth. To Representative Livermore the matter was quite simple because with “Portsmouth being a place of considerable commerce and navigation, it is important that the mail should arrive at its proper time, and as early as possible.”³¹ Representative Gilman had worried that the debate arose from a perceived rivalry between Portsmouth and Exeter, as the former town had been the state capital until the early years of the Revolution when the capital was moved farther inland for safety. Clearly, however, Representative Livermore felt that the economic interests of Portsmouth were more important than the business of the government of the State of New Hampshire.

Yet another view of the issue came from a Representative George Thatcher of Massachusetts. He believed that the real problem could be boiled down to one question: “shall the mail from Boston arrive at Exeter about two hours earlier, on the same day, than at Portsmouth; or shall it arrive at Portsmouth first, and at Exeter the next day, or within six or seven days after?”³² Representative Thatcher believed that the potential for delaying the mail going north and the problem of depriving the Portsmouth merchants of vital information was ludicrous. The only reason that Exeter was being put on the cross route was because people

³¹ *The Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 142, 358.

³² *The Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 142, 359.

wanted the mail to go to Portsmouth first. During his speech Representative Livermore had stated that “the letters for Exeter are few, compared with the number for Portsmouth. The postmaster has stated the amount of the postage of letters for Exeter, passing through his office at Portsmouth, to be about fifteen dollars and a half, in eleven months, from the first of January 1791; a sum very inconsiderable indeed compared to the amount of postage received for letters delivered in Portsmouth during the same period.”³³ Representative Livermore concluded that this meant that there was little business between Boston and Exeter, but Representative Thatcher simply concluded that there was very little business between Exeter and Portsmouth. Given the fact that, at the time that this bill was in Congress, mail was being delivered from Boston to Portsmouth by way of Hampton, it would have been foolish to send a letter bound for Exeter through Portsmouth. The letter, as Representative Gilman had pointed out earlier, would sit around in that office for days.

The final Representative to contribute to this debate was Representative Jeremiah Smith of New Hampshire. He contended that most of the trading of New Hampshire goods was done in Boston. Adding Exeter to the main post route would eliminate roughly twenty five miles from the distance between points in the interior of New Hampshire and the markets in Boston. The Senate proposed route, which put Exeter on the cross route, would become so circuitous and costly that most businessmen of that town would resort to private conveyances to conduct their business. This would have accounted for the lack of Exeter bound letters in the Portsmouth Post Office.³⁴ By putting Exeter on the main coastal post route, the only person to suffer would perhaps be the Portsmouth Postmaster. His letter volume might have decreased, which could

³³ *The Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 359.

³⁴ *The Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 142, 362.

have caused a decrease in compensation, but on the whole this change could have resulted in an increase of revenue for the entire service. Direct service from Boston to Exeter would have removed the need for merchants to use private conveyance.

Alas, Representative Livermore and the merchants of Portsmouth won. Exeter was taken off of the main post route, making Portsmouth the postal gateway to New Hampshire. All of the mail that was destined for residents of New Hampshire traveled first to Portsmouth, and was then dispersed to other offices in the state. Congress' decision to move Exeter to a different post route signaled the establishment of several key aspects of control in the post office. First, this action re-affirmed Congress' ultimate decision to retain the power to establish post roads. Congress decided to cut the Postmaster General, the leader of the new General Post Office, as well as the President completely out of the decision making process. Second, this decision exposed the power relationship between the national government and the state governments. Congress chose the interests of Portsmouth merchants over the interests of Exeter businessmen and the members of the state government. They essentially used the federally backed postal system, which in this very same act admitted newspapers to the mail in order to speed up the diffusion of information across the nation, to deprive the New Hampshire state government of the freshest news. This established a precedent for control of the postal system that would last for almost forty years, and it laid a stone in the foundation for the power dynamic between the federal and state governments.

The significance of the Post Office Act of 1792 on the establishment of the American postal service is undeniable. This single piece of legislation admitted newspapers into the mail, it created a standard for privacy and safety in the mail, established rules and regulations for the conduct of postal officers and contractors, and it laid out the power structure that would

dominate postal politics for the next forty years. The establishment of this power structure could be seen in the Congressional decision to retain the power of designating post roads and in the Congressional decision to favor the people and interests of the town of Portsmouth, New Hampshire over the people and interests of the town of Exeter, New Hampshire. The merchants of Portsmouth were given access to the latest news first by making Portsmouth the only New Hampshire stop on the main, interstate post route while the businessmen and legislators in Exeter were forced to resort either to private posts or to waiting as much as a week for the mail. Congress' power play established the dominance of federal interests over state interests and secured Congressional control over the expansion of the General Post Office in one stroke. But this particular squabble over postal power in New Hampshire was only the beginning.

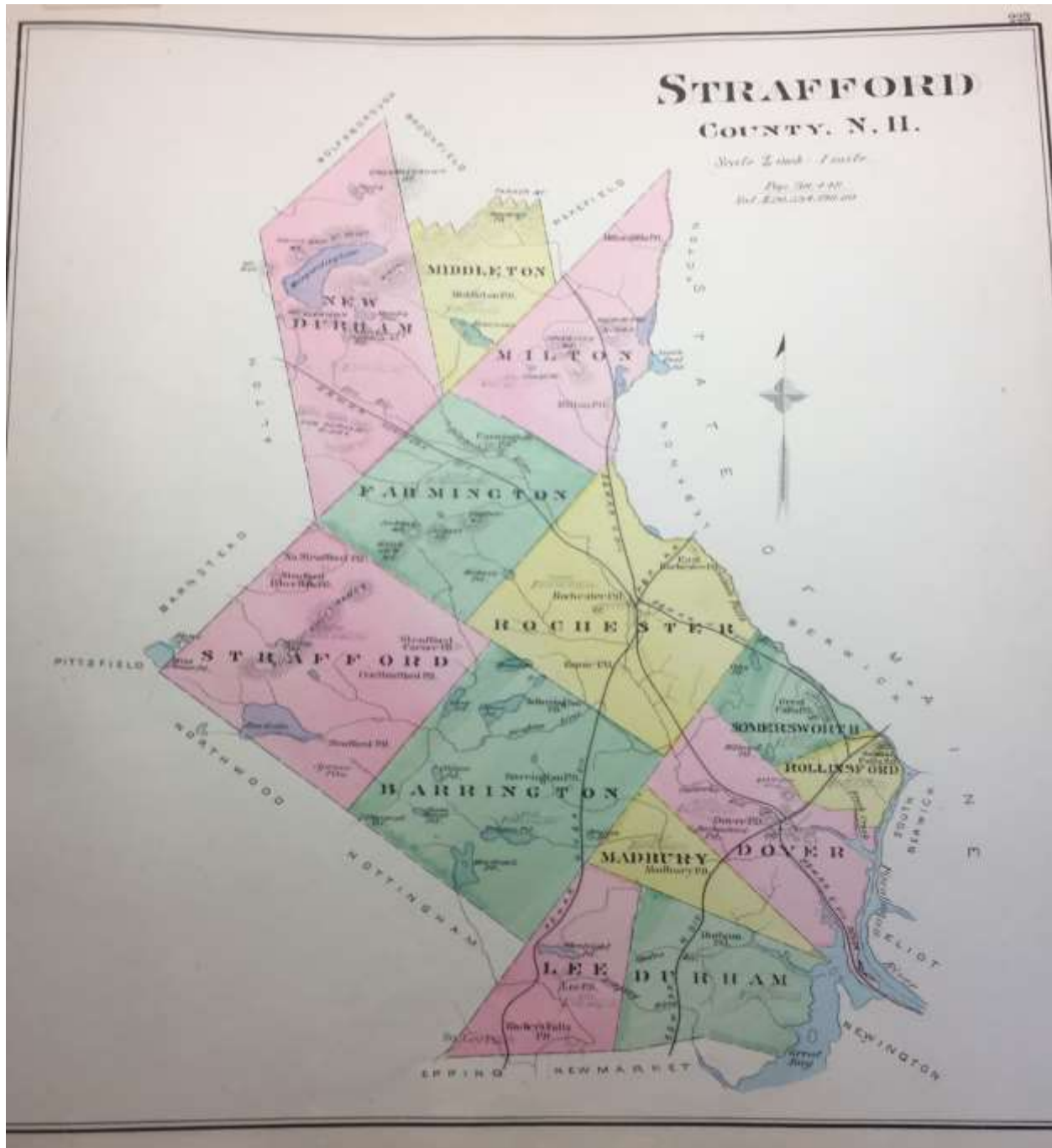


Figure 3. Map of Strafford County, New Hampshire from 1892

This map shows Durham, near the bottom right corner, in context with the surrounding New Hampshire towns. Published in 1892, this map comes from a time outside of the period being studied here, but it still offers a clear visual of the town in context. (Map by D.H. Hurd & Co. "Strafford County, NH." *Town and City Atlas of the State of New Hampshire*. [1892]:223. Held in the Milne Special Collections and Archives at the University of New Hampshire.)

Chapter Two: Developing the System in Durham, New Hampshire

While the United States Post Office gained its first real foothold with the passage of the Post Office Act of 1792, the service did not immediately spring into being thereafter. It took many years for the federal post office to begin to take shape. For many scholars, post roads have been the preferred metric for explaining the expansion of the service from the 1790's into the late 1820's. This scholarly decision is quite reasonable; the statistics for the miles of post roads in the United States during the first thirty-odd years of the service are impressive. Many of these statistics will be included here, and this chapter will continue to look at post roads as they critically shaped the relationship between the General Post Office and Congress throughout this time period. The main focus of this chapter, however, will be on the influence that individual offices had on the service as a whole. The extension of the post roads was an obvious display of federal power, but the role that individual offices played helped to fund that national power, while simultaneously obscuring the national postal entity. One particular office that will be examined is that of Durham, NH. Many of the records from this post office have survived in the University of New Hampshire's Milne Special Collections and Archives and offer a valuable glimpse into the workings of a small yet important office on the western edge of the New Hampshire seacoast.

Between the passage of the Post Office Act of 1792 and the inauguration of Andrew Jackson in 1829, five different men served as Postmaster General of the United States. Colonel Timothy Pickering was the second Postmaster General of the United States, serving from August of 1791 until January of 1795. His predecessor, Samuel Osgood, had been appointed shortly after the ratification of the United States Constitution and resigned only three years later. At the time of Osgood's appointment in 1789, there were only about 1,785 miles of post roads in the United

States, connecting the original thirteen colonies along a coastal route.³⁵ While Colonel Pickering served as the Postmaster General, his philosophy for running the department was simple: service was to be extended and improved at all costs. Even in places where the revenue from a route did not support the continued use of the road for mail delivery, the expansion of the service and the growing connections between American citizens were more important. When Pickering resigned in January 1795, the number of post routes zig zagging across the United States had grown to include 13,207 miles worth of roads.³⁶ Despite this impressive surge in the length of post routes, the postal service was still a very primitive operation when Joseph Habersham was appointed to be the third Postmaster General in 1795.

Habersham served from 1795 until 1801 when he was “allowed” to resign by Thomas Jefferson. He was appointed by George Washington during his second term and continued to serve during the administration of John Adams. When the national government moved from Philadelphia to the new federal city of Washington in 1800, Habersham only required two wagons to transport all of the records, furniture, and supplies for the central office of his fledgling postal service. At the time of the move there were 20,817 miles of post roads in the United States, and a year later when Habersham resigned that number had increased to 22,207 miles.³⁷ This growth represents a 6.6% increase in the total length of post roads in just about a year.

Habersham’s replacement as the Postmaster General was rooted in Thomas Jefferson’s worries about the fidelity of a national postal service and its potential to become a political

³⁵ Gerald Cullinan, *The United States Postal Service* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 34.

³⁶ Cullinan, 40.

³⁷ Wayne E. Fuller, *The American Mail* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 49; Cullinan, 41.

weapon. Jefferson expressed many of these concerns prior to his assumption of the office of the President, yet went on to make his own personal fears a reality. Worried about whether he could trust postmasters appointed by the previous administrations, particularly those appointed by the Adams administration, he ordered his new Postmaster General to remove all Federalist officeholders. Gideon Granger, Jefferson's pick to replace Habersham, complied with this order. Historian Gerald Cullinan argues this episode in postal history was the real beginning of the spoils system within the service, twenty eight years before the administration of Andrew Jackson and the generally accepted start of this system. To argue this point would, however, be misleading. The proscription of non-Democratic postmasters during the early years of the Jackson administration will be covered in the next chapter, but suffice it to say that the Jacksonian removals marked a new direction for the postal service. The spoils system became an integral part of the hiring process after 1829, but not after 1801. The Jeffersonian removals were an early example of the Jacksonian system, but the proscription of postmasters who harbored partisan leanings opposite those of the party in power did not become the norm until 1829.

Gideon Granger was an impressively long-serving Postmaster General for this point in time. He was appointed by Thomas Jefferson in 1801 and was eventually removed by James Madison in 1814. Granger oversaw the service's move into "Blodget's Hotel," sometimes called simply the "Hotel Building," in 1810. Built by Samuel Blodget Jr. at a cost of \$50,000 and never actually used as a hotel, the federal government bought the property for \$10,000 and made it the home of the headquarters of the General Post Office and of the Patent Office.³⁸ President James Madison kept Gideon Granger as the Postmaster General for five years because while Madison did not trust Granger, he wanted to keep the Post Office above politics. By the time that

³⁸ Margaret Burri, "A New View of Blodget's Hotel," *Washington History* 2, no. 1 (1990), 103; Cullinan, 41.

President Madison eventually fired Postmaster General Granger in 1814, the postal service had grown to encompass 41,736 miles of post roads.³⁹ Madison then appointed Return J. Meigs Jr. as Postmaster General, who led the department through a time of financial embarrassment for the service and would eventually resign due to poor health in 1823. Meigs was another long-serving Postmaster General who eventually extended the postal service to encompass 84,860 miles of post roads. In 1819 alone, Meigs' post office installed service on 8,000 miles of post routes.⁴⁰ His successor and the sixth Postmaster General of the United States, John McLean, served from 1823 until 1829. By 1829 McLean's "Post Office Department" encompassed a whopping 114,780 miles of post roads.⁴¹ From 1,785 miles of roads in 1789 to 114,780 miles of roads in 1829, it is undeniable that the American postal service grew rapidly during its first forty years of operation. As Historian Brian Balogh points out in his book *A Government Out of Sight*, the nationally funded, fledgling American postal service dwarfed all of its European counterparts during this time period.⁴² But what makes these numbers so important? Why were post roads such an important issue during the first forty years of the American postal service? The answer to these questions is, all at once, both quite simple and exceedingly complex. The simple answer is that the ability to designate post roads afforded immense political power, but the more complex answer involves who held that power.

As was discussed in the last chapter, Congress retained its Constitutional right to designate post roads, deciding against giving that power to the President or to the Postmaster General.

³⁹ Cullinan, 44-45.

⁴⁰ Fuller, 50.

⁴¹ Cullinan, 52.

⁴² Brian Balogh, *A Government out of Sight: The Mystery of National Authority in Nineteenth Century America* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 219.

Connecting their constituents was crucial to Congressmen because in a widespread, republican country, “Isolation posed the greatest challenge to citizens, the states they lived in, and the successful union of the states.”⁴³ The expansion of the postal service offered the perfect opportunity for Congress to knit the states together, to promote political discourse, and to simply make themselves look good. Citizens from across the growing nation would send petitions to Congress, requesting post roads leading to even the most remote frontier settlements. Historian Wayne Fuller recounted how the process worked, stating that, “at session after session congressmen obligingly entered their petitions in the records of Congress, passed law after law establishing post roads for their constituents, and blithely handed the postmaster general the task of installing the postal service on routes they had created.”⁴⁴ This statement uncovers several key aspects of the relationship between Congress, the Postmaster General, and the broader postal service. The first interesting conclusion that can be drawn indicates that Congress held the real power in the post office, not the Postmaster General.

The Postmaster General was the figure head of the postal service in much the same way that the President is the political figure head of the United States, but he lacked the critical power to control the growth of his own department. Richard Kielbowicz detailed some of the responsibilities of the Postmaster General in his article “The Press, Post Office, and the Flow of News in the Early Republic”, stating:

The Postmaster General offered some guidance and co-ordinated the operations of his far-flung department through published regulations and correspondence with his deputies. These reflected the problems most frequently encountered in conveying publications

⁴³ Balogh, 13.

⁴⁴ Fuller, 46.

through the mails – preparing papers for mailing, collecting and accounting for postage, uncertainties about delivery, the proper use of post roads, and the nebulous postal status of non-newspaper periodicals.⁴⁵

This meant that the Postmaster General coordinated the operations within individual offices and managed how post roads were to be used, but he had no actual control over which roads became post roads. He was simply expected to materialize any law that Congress passed implementing new post roads. This expectation led to another aspect of the relationship between the Postmaster General and Congress: the Congressmen who passed post route laws were exemplary representatives of republican government, remaining responsive to the people even when they were thousands of miles away. By leaving all of the details involved in setting up these post roads to the Postmaster General, Congress reaped the rewards of public favor without ever facing the consequences of failing to implement their legislation in a timely manner. The Postmaster General was left to implement these laws by contracting for postal carriers, establishing new offices, managing delivery schedules, and financing the entire thing solely out of postage revenue. Postmasters General got the raw end of this deal and often fell short of successfully implementing Congressional post road laws. This situation put the Postmaster General, especially Postmaster General Meigs, in a precarious position.

Several things happened during the administration of Postmaster General Meigs that could very easily have made him a distinctly unpopular man. The first issue that Meigs faced dealt with non-letter and non-newspaper materials that were carried in the mail. This included magazines, books, and pamphlets. After the British burned the city of Washington in 1814, the only large government building left standing housed the General Post Office and the Patent

⁴⁵ Richard Kielbowicz, “The Press, Post Office, and the Flow of News in the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 3, no 3 (1983): 265.

Office. While no postal records were lost during the destruction of the city, a notice was published in a local newspaper by the postal administration stating that “the situation of the country make[s] it extremely difficult to carry [the] mails, and therefore no books or pamphlets (other than magazines) are to be sent by mail until further notice from this office.”⁴⁶ In the context of the War of 1812 this statement was entirely reasonable, especially given the destruction of the national capital, but pamphlets and magazines had always held an ambiguous status within the mail. These materials had been officially admitted to the service in 1794, so it was up to the Postmaster General to regulate their passage through the system. The way that the Postmaster General did this was by leaving the admission of these materials up to the discretion of the deputy postmasters across the country.

Books and pamphlets were decidedly bigger than letters, and they were considered less important than newspapers because they did not carry vital political news that kept citizens across the country informed. Their carriage was suspended around Washington after the burning of the city in 1814, and then in 1815 Postmaster General Meigs decided to effectively exclude them from the mail all together.⁴⁷ Their bulk and extra weight was often too cumbersome for mail contractors to carry, particularly those traveling on horseback. The mail carrier’s prerogative was to transmit the mail in a timely manner, something that was already a difficult task given the weather, the road conditions, and the amount of mail that they had to carry. Deputy Postmasters still held the final say over the admission of books or pamphlets in their individual offices, but they now had the official backing of the Postmaster General if it was deemed necessary to refuse the entry of these items into the system. The issue of books and

⁴⁶ “Books and Papers of the Several Executive Departments Destroyed in the Conflagration in 1814,” H.R. Doc 13-374 at 248 (1814); “General Post Office,” *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), Sept. 3, 1814.

⁴⁷ Kielbowicz, 269.

pamphlets in the mail certainly did not have as sweeping an impact as a similar ban on newspapers would have, but nonetheless this decision must certainly have made the Postmaster General a number of enemies.

The second issue that arose during Meigs' administration was a Congressional investigation into the fiscal practices of the post office. With the Panic of 1819, the bursting of a land boom bubble, and the extension of service to numerous post roads that were not worth the cost of up keep, the postal ledger began to run into the red. The ever important question of whether to prioritize the extension of the service, or to balance the budget resurfaced, and this time it brought with it a Congressional inquiry into postal practices. Two similar investigations had been conducted before, offering Congress the opportunity to meddle further in the affairs of the post office. They did not find any corruption within the postal structure that could have accounted for the financial deficit, but they did find messy record keeping. With the rapid expansion of the service, and the institution of many new post roads the service's financial records were in shambles. In exploring how this all was possible Historian Gerald Cullinan explained that "if the Meigs administration suffered some economic embarrassment, the blame must be shared by Congress."⁴⁸ Congress passed laws to extend service onto new post roads, but they passed off all of the logistical details to the Postmaster General, including the issue of financially supporting the new roads. This push undeniably helped to rapidly modernize the service, but Congress retained all of the glory of expansion while pinning all of the shortcomings on the Postmaster General. The most colorful description of the situation came from Historian Wayne E. Fuller in his book *The American Mail* stating, "members of Congress, eager to give their constituents the mail service they demanded, established post roads helter skelter

⁴⁸ Cullinan, 46.

throughout the land as if the money to pay for them flowed from an artesian well.”⁴⁹ The Postmaster General had the unsavory task of finding that artesian well and tapping it for funds; Postmaster General Meigs had no such luck.

R.J. Meigs’ successor in 1823 was Ohio judge John McLean, who would become one of the most popular Postmasters General to date. He played an incredibly important role in the postal removals of 1829 and will be discussed again in the next chapter. Here, however, his policies serve as a suitable transition into discussing the Post Office in Durham, New Hampshire. The town of Durham is located near the seacoast of New Hampshire, having river access to the Great Bay estuary, which in turn offers access to Portsmouth and to the Atlantic Ocean. During this time period, the inland towns of New Hampshire produced a vast array of agricultural products including meat, butter, cheese, poultry, grain, cider, dried apples, peas, beans, hides, wool, furs, venison, fish, and timber that were sold at markets in Portsmouth and in Boston.⁵⁰ Getting goods to market could be a problem, however, and in 1791 a petition was sent to the state government in order to create a newer, more direct road from Durham on the coast to Concord in the center of the state.⁵¹ This petition was approved, and the proposed road became the First New Hampshire Turnpike. As the endpoint of the new turnpike, Durham saw “mile long caravans passing regularly from Concord to Durham and Portsmouth [that] long survived in local memory.”⁵² The town of Durham was opportunely placed on the western edge of the coastal

⁴⁹ Fuller, 51.

⁵⁰ Donna-Belle Garvin and James L. Garvin, *On the Road North of Boston: New Hampshire Taverns and Turnpikes, 1700-1900* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1988), 84, 89.

⁵¹ Everett S. Stackpole and Lucien Thompson, *History of the Town of Durham New Hampshire (Oyster River Plantation) with Genealogical Notes* (Concord, NH: The Rumford Press, 1913), 1:236.

⁵² Garvin and Garvin, 89.

New Hampshire communities and on the far eastern edge of the inland towns, making it a critical place to put a post office.

The town of Durham has a postal history that actually pre-dates the ratification of the federal Constitution. While there was no physical post office in the town, Durham was first included on a post route in 1786. After the construction of the First New Hampshire Turnpike in the early 1790's and the redirection of trade goods from the interior of the state through the town, a separate post office was established to serve both the town and the surrounding area. Benjamin Thompson was appointed the first Postmaster of Durham on October 1, 1796 and served for exactly six years to the day.⁵³ Mr. Thompson may have been one of the Federalist office holders that was removed by Postmaster General Habersham and the Jefferson administration. Mr. Thompson was succeeded by Edward Wells, who served until 1808 when he was replaced by Benjamin Lapish. Mr. Lapish only served for six months before being replaced by George Frost Jr., often spelled "Ffrost", who served intermittently with his son George until 1848. Many records indicate the widespread use of the spelling "Ffrost", but for purposes of clarity "Frost" will be the preferred spelling from here onward.

Under the leadership of the Frost family, the post office was located in a store on the side of the road at the Durham Falls Bridge, though different sources place the store on different sides of the road. The town history of Durham placed the store on the north side of the road, but an article held in the Milne Special Collections at the University of New Hampshire places the store on the east side of the road.⁵⁴ Using *Hurd's Town and City Atlas* from 1892 and the current

⁵³ Stackpole and Thompson, 1:332.

⁵⁴ Post Office Records 1813-1847, Folder 13, Box 1, Durham Town Records, 1732-1993, MC 149, Milne Special Collections and Archives, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, NH, USA.

geography of Durham for reference, the building in question appears to lie on the northeastern side of the road. The Frost family home still stands, and now houses the Three Chimneys Inn and the Frost Sawyer Tavern. During the early nineteenth century, however, the post office that was located here was inside a store. George Frost Jr. was listed in the town genealogy as “a merchant, farmer, magistrate, and representative of Durham in 1807,” as well as being the postmaster.⁵⁵

The practice of keeping the post office in the same building as a store or tavern was not uncommon. As Historian Richard R. John said of post offices during this time period, “The vast majority consisted of nothing more than a counter in the corner of a store, tavern, law office, or apothecary shop.”⁵⁶ The placement of these offices inside a local business was a logical decision for a great many reasons. The primary reason would be the centrality of the location. Everybody knew where the local store or tavern was. In discussing the taverns of New Hampshire, one source mentioned how “as a building open to all and visited by many, the tavern was a natural place for the exchange of information, for formal and informal meetings, and for business contacts with the wider world.”⁵⁷ Stores served many of the same functions. Being a place to exchange information was a critical role for post offices not only in the national sense, where they helped to ensure that information reached all corners of the country, but at the local level as well.

Stores and taverns were meeting places, making them the best spot to learn the latest news and to socialize with one’s neighbors. Newspapers, the bearers of this news, made up most

⁵⁵ Everett S. Stackpole and Winthrop S. Meserve, *History of the Town of Durham New Hampshire (Oyster River Plantation) with Genealogical Notes* (Concord, NH: The Rumford Press, 1913), 2:197.

⁵⁶ Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 113.

⁵⁷ Garvin and Garvin, 10.

of the mail that traveled to towns and smaller cities across the country. Newspaper postage was significantly cheaper than letter postage, but not everyone subscribed to their local papers. This did not mean, however, that non-subscribers did not hear the news. The newspapers that came into smaller post offices across the nation were essentially considered to be public property; they were not only for the eyes of the private subscriber. Men would gather in the stores and taverns that doubled as the post office to hear the news and to socialize.⁵⁸ Newspaper subscribers would share the latest news with those gathered or, if the owner of the paper was not present, another literate neighbor would read aloud instead. People often complained to printers “that newspapers left in bundles at local taverns were often appropriated by those who, though not willing to purchase a newspaper themselves, were ‘for engrossing and coveting their neighbors’.”⁵⁹ Women were categorically excluded from these activities, but the placement of the post office within a store or tavern would have only helped to increase the sense of community within a town. Under the care of George Frost, the Durham Post Office was located inside a store, meaning that the socialization among neighbors and ‘borrowing’ of newspapers would have been a very common occurrence.

Another reason for the post office being located inside of a store or tavern was the fact that most individual post masters could not possibly survive on the wages that they made from the post office alone. Postmaster compensation amounts varied depending upon how much their office took in for postage. This meant that only the very largest city offices could bring in enough postage to provide an adequate living for the postmaster. In 1825, George Frost received

⁵⁸ John, 154,155, 162.

⁵⁹ Garvin and Garvin, 83.

\$39.04 in compensation for running the Durham post office.⁶⁰ Even by nineteenth century standards, this was not very much. According to Historian Seth Rockman, whose book *Scraping By* explores the lives of wage laborers in Baltimore, Maryland, an unskilled laborer could expect to earn about \$1 per day of work. This was the typical working man's daily wage from 1790 until 1820. Work was not continuous, however, meaning that wage laborers rarely worked a full week, let alone a full month at this rate. An ordinary seaman could receive anywhere from \$22-\$35 for a month's work, but again this work was rare and would not have lasted for a full 12 months.⁶¹ Given the inconsistency of wage labor, \$39.04 may seem reasonable. An ordinary seaman could have made almost this much in the span of one month, but \$39.04 was the amount of compensation that George Frost Jr. earned for an entire year. There was no way that he could have supported himself, let alone a family, on this amount of money.

Postmaster General John McLean was actually known for "paying" his postmasters poorly and he fully expected them to pursue secondary employment in order to survive. One of his justifications for this practice, however, came in the form of franking privileges. A franked piece of mail is one that has been marked to indicate that the postage has been paid. Franking privileges offered a person the right to send and receive mail under their own frank, or their own mark, denoting postage. This privilege allowed postmasters to send and receive mail for free. Franking privileges were of course abused by some, but Postmaster General McLean defended the privilege during a Congressional inquiry about its abolishment by saying that, "in many cases, it would be difficult, if not impracticable, to obtain the services of competent persons for

⁶⁰ *A Register of the Officers and Agents, Civil, Military, and Naval, in the Service of the United States on the 30th of September, 1825; Together with the Names, Force, and Condition of all the Ships and Vessels Belonging to the United States and When and Where Built* (Washington: Davis & Force, 1825), *31.

⁶¹ Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press: 2009), 72, 75.

post masters, if the temptation of the privilege were withdrawn; and from its utility in this respect, its derived the strongest reason for its contrivance.”⁶² Congress did successfully abolish the franking privilege in 1845, even if it was only temporary. During the eighteen months after the privilege was abolished, one third of all the postmasters in the country resigned.⁶³ Franking privileges were both a desirable and necessary perk of the postmaster job, but the ability to send and receive letters for free would not have fed George Frost’s family. Franking privileges would actually have been a boon for Frost who, as a merchant, would have mailed costly letters on a regular basis, but by adding postmaster to his list of jobs, George Frost Jr. would have been able to make enough money for a living. Between the franking privileges, the monetary compensation, and the customers that the post office would inevitably have brought into the store, placing the post office inside Mr. Frost’s store was an important move for the postmaster himself.

The final reason that many post offices were located inside stores and taverns was the fact that the owner or proprietor was a well-known member of the community. The security of the mail was paramount, as was illustrated in the Post Office Act of 1792, meaning that the trustworthiness of postmaster appointees was critical. In an 1828 copy of the Post Office Laws, Instructions, and Regulations booklet, the following guideline was provided for choosing an individual to serve as postmaster: “In making an appointment of postmaster, either to fill a vacancy, or on the establishment of a new office, it is desirable to have the favorable expression of the neighborhood. Every applicant should consider such an expression as necessary to his

⁶² John McLean, *Letter from the Post Master General upon the Subject of Abolishing the Privilege of Franking, now enjoyed by the Post Masters of the United States*, H.R. Doc. 19-159, (1826).

⁶³ John, 123.

success.”⁶⁴ If the local postmaster was well known, well liked, and highly respected, people would be more likely to trust him to do his job, and more likely to trust the postal organization as a whole.

As postmaster, George Frost Jr. would have had three main jobs to do: sort the mail, serve the public, and account for postal revenue. Serving the public would have been a fairly straightforward job, particularly for a shopkeeper or tavern owner. Sorting the mail would have been a critical task for ensuring that all the letters for the office were received, recorded, and picked up intact. When customers did not come in to pick up their letters, it was the job of the postmaster to advertise these letters in the local newspaper or in prominent places around town. One such “list of letters” was published for Durham by Postmaster Benjamin U. Lapish in the *New Hampshire Gazette* on September 9, 1807. Only ten names were listed, five of which were for individuals living in other towns.⁶⁵ Handwritten lists from the Durham office also survive in the Special Collections at the University of New Hampshire. One list, dated September 30, 1826 gave the names of 15 Durham residents and 16 Lee residents who had letters to pick up at the post office. A second, undated list gave 14 names in Durham and 29 names in Lee.⁶⁶ This list, interestingly, included names that had been crossed out. This list may have been for George Frost’s own personal use, and the crossings out may have indicated that these people had picked up their letters. When letters were not picked up within 6 months of their arrival in the office and their subsequent advertisement in the paper, they were sent to the Dead Letter Office in Washington, D.C. This was the only place in the whole system that a postal employee could

⁶⁴ *Post Office Laws, Instructions, and Forms Published for the Regulation of the Post Office* (Washington: Way & Gideon, 1828), 49.

⁶⁵ “List of Letters,” *New Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth, NH), Sept. 8, 1807.

⁶⁶ Post Office Records, 1813-1847, Oversized Box 1.

open a letter that had entered the mail system, and only then to find where the letter really ought to go.

Sorting the mail was an important job, but recording the postage revenues for each office was the third and final job that every postmaster had to do. This was yet another instance where trust in the postmaster was critical. They had to record every piece of mail, be it a letter or a newspaper, which came into or left their office. They had to keep track of how much the postage cost, when the postage bill had arrived, and where the letter was going to or had come from. During the early and mid-1820's, the Durham office sent and received countless letters from around the country. Most of the items listed on these forms were traveling within New Hampshire, often to Portsmouth, Dover, Concord, or Gilmanton, or they were going somewhere in Massachusetts. There were occasionally letters that traveled much farther away, sometimes as far as Natchez, Mississippi, Marietta, Ohio, or to Alexandria in the District of Columbia. These postage records from the Durham office, coupled with several postage accrual reports from various years in the 1820's, help to contextualize the expansion of the postal service and the conflict between the Postmaster General and Congress.

When Congress approved post road petitions and left the Postmaster General to pay the bills, the money to subsidize newer post offices and post roads had to come from somewhere. This expansion of the postal service is generally discussed in terms of national westward expansion, but New Hampshire towns benefitted from this policy as well. In the year 1822, the State of New Hampshire was home to 165 post offices. Portsmouth was the highest grossing office in the state, bringing in \$3,344.17 worth of postage, but more than half of the offices (ninety four to be specific) in New Hampshire made less than \$50 in postage for the year.

Durham was not one of these offices, making \$75.42 worth of postage.⁶⁷ Of the offices that made less than \$50 per year, thirty six made less than \$20 per year. The lowest amount of postage for that year was collected in Strafford, New Hampshire, and only amounted to about \$0.33. The next lowest was the town of Whiton, which collected only \$0.79 in postage. A similar pattern appears in the postage accrual records for 1826 as well. Again, Portsmouth was the highest grossing office at \$1,966.77 in postage, but seventy percent of the 188 offices in New Hampshire made less than fifty dollars in postage. Durham made \$96.67 in postage, but sixty five of the other offices in the state made less than \$20. North Barrington, New Hampshire made only \$0.30 in postage; the White Mountain office did little better at \$0.32 and the Sutton Village office made only \$0.33 in postage.⁶⁸ This pattern of postage accrual helps to reveal how individual post offices across the country were indirectly subsidizing the expansion of the system.

As an older office in the State of New Hampshire, the postage collected at the post office in Durham was used to subsidize the creation of offices and post roads that could not possibly be self-sustaining. In its notable eagerness to extend postal service to all citizens, Congress designated post roads that could not possibly convey enough mail in order to offer a reasonable financial return. The Postmaster General had to find the money to open offices on these roads, staff them, and to contract with mail carriers to convey the mail without these routes being self-sustaining. Offices like Durham became stuck in the middle, operating on a scale that would subsidize the services that went to these newer offices. Even if some of these offices later earned

⁶⁷ *Letter from the Postmaster General, transmitting statements shewing the amount of postage received at each of the post offices in the United States and the territories thereof during the year 1822. February 26, 1824. Read: Ordered that it lie upon the table, H.R. Doc 18-95, at 32 (1824).*

⁶⁸ *Postage accruing in the U.S.-1826. Letter from the Postmaster General, transmitting, a statement of the nett amount of postage accruing at each Post Office, in each State and Territory, for one year, ending 31st March, 1826. January 3, 1827. -- Read, and laid upon the table, H.R. Doc. 19-35 at 23-24 (1827).*

more postage, such as the Strafford office, it likely was not enough to make an overwhelming difference. The Strafford office made \$10.34 worth of postage in 1826, but the newer office of Strafford Corner only made \$0.86 in postage. Offices like Durham subsidized the creation of these offices, which is understandable. Revenues must be used to expand the system. But they continued to subsidize the operation of offices that simply did not take in very much postage.

Postage was expensive, and the postal service was running a huge operation, so the role of offices like Durham within the system was two-fold: first, they had to subsidize expansion. Then, once new offices had been opened, some still needed a subsidy to remain open; Durham did not take in postage on the scale of a place like Portsmouth (few places did), but the town would still have contributed to keeping offices like Strafford and White Mountain operating. So older offices subsidized the system in more ways than one. They were caught up in a system of sustaining their own service as well as the service of other, smaller offices by Congress. Congressional zeal overrode any potential frugality on the Postmaster General's part that may have kept the system on an even keel, causing the number of post offices and post roads across the country to inflate like a balloon. With the rapid growth of the system, however, needed to come trust. People needed to trust that the money they spent on postage was being used productively, that their letters would arrive, and that they would arrive unopened. Trust in the system was a critical aspect of the postal apparatus.

But why did people trust the system? Most citizens were wary of big government, so why would they trust a nationally funded post office? As has been discussed, Congress became rather adept at manipulating the circumstances to make themselves look fabulous in the eyes of their constituents, while simultaneously avoiding all possible consequences. Part of the answer to the question of why citizens would trust the federal government is the fact that the government

largely remained out of sight. Richard John put it rather succinctly when he stated that “for the vast majority of Americans the postal system was the central government.”⁶⁹ The Durham Post Office was likely the only place that many of the town’s residents ever encountered the federal government. Brian Balogh, whose book *A Government Out of Sight* focused on how the government tends to be most active when it is out of the view of the general population, conceded the fact that the post office was the most visible arm of the federal government and yet still incredibly beneficial. He also pointed out that “national government remained hidden in plain sight because many of its activities were directed at the margins of the nation.”⁷⁰ This was exactly what Congress, the Postmaster General, and the post office did: it hid in plain sight. The post roads that Congress approved and foisted on the Postmaster General literally led to the margins of the nation. But why would a Durham resident care about a post road that had been approved for a tiny town in Ohio? First, that concerned citizen’s postage may have been helping to pay for that new post road. Second, the physical manifestation of these government actions are quite obvious. Post roads could be seen, discussed, and traveled, but the machinations that led to those post roads were out of the line of sight of the average citizen.

When people began to trust the General Post Office and the Post Office Department, they put their trust in a federal entity that they couldn’t possibly have fully understood. They put their trust in the post office, and they did so through local actors. The residents of Durham put their trust in George Frost, their local manifestation of the postal service. Brian Balogh explored this idea, saying that by “blending into the fabric of the local community and [being] integrally connected to the local economy, postmasters helped naturalize and minimize the central

⁶⁹ John, 4.

⁷⁰ Balogh, 11.

governments presence in the community, rather than boldly proclaiming national prerogatives.”⁷¹ These local actors had responsibilities to their families, to their communities, and to the post office. When George Frost’s neighbor walked into the post office to pick up his newspaper, or to mail a letter, he wouldn’t have seen a federal employee smiling at him from behind the counter, he would simply have seen his neighbor George. That is part of the power that the post office held during the early nineteenth century. It was the government, blatantly acting in communities across the nation, fundamentally changing the way that people lived their lives and yet remaining somewhat hidden.

During the first forty years of the operation of the General Post Office, the American postal service did a remarkably good job of hiding in plain sight. Congress very visibly extended service to thousands of miles of post roads across the growing nation, and thousands of citizens served as postmaster to their local community. Older offices like the one in Durham, New Hampshire subsidized this growth, and subsidized the continued existence of offices across the nation. The people put their trust in the postal apparatus without really knowing what was going on behind the scenes. The post office took on a very local nature; offices were usually placed in public spaces where people could socialize and hear the news and they were manned by familiar faces from within the community. But people did not see the political sidestepping that Congress did, accepting the benefits of extending postal service while foisting all post road and post office maintenance on the Postmaster General. The people gave their trust, and therein an enormous amount of power, to the General Post Office and to the federal government. They benefitted greatly from the relationship, but an interesting question remains unanswered: did the people

⁷¹ Balogh 229.

really know what they were getting themselves into when they put all of their trust in the post office?

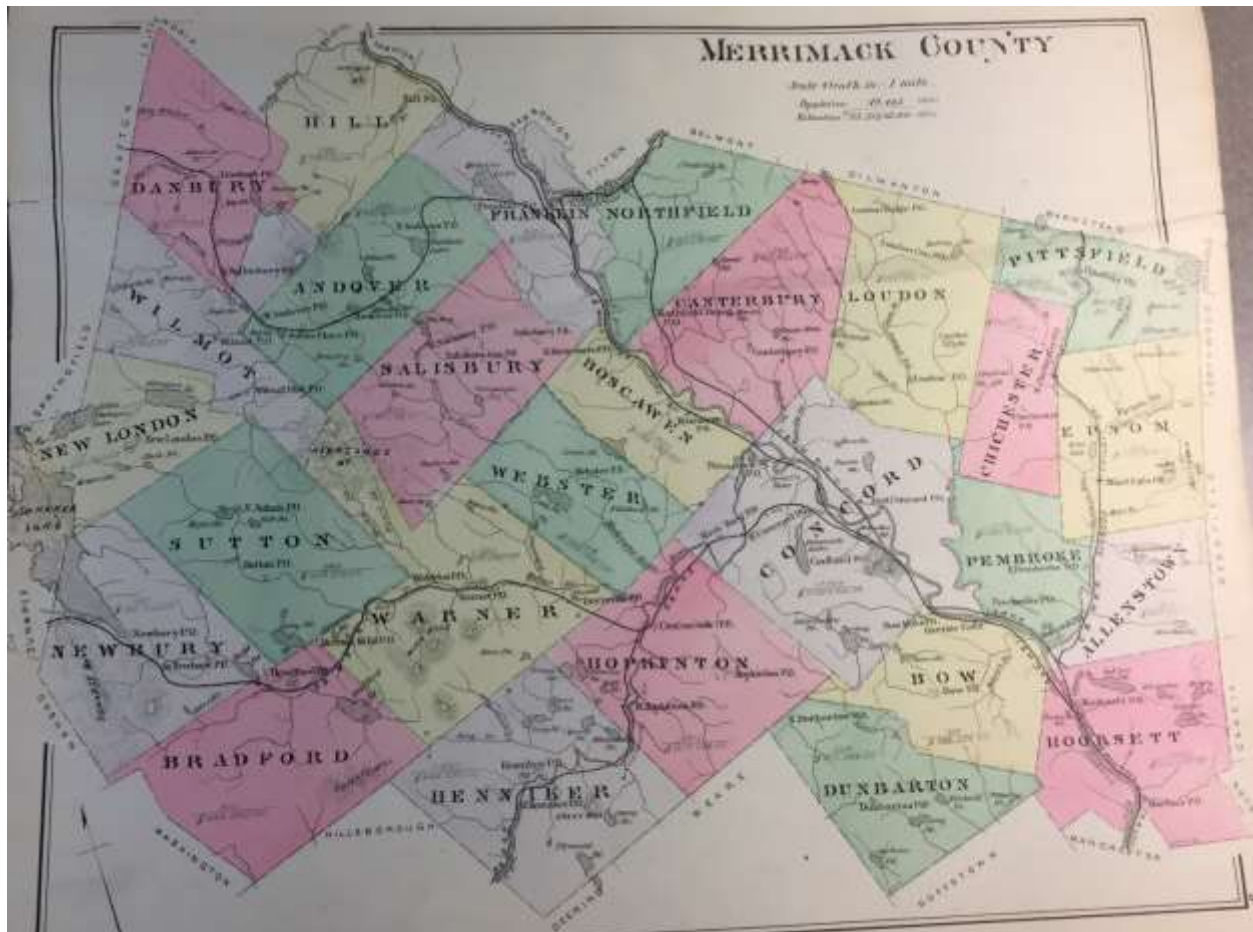


Figure 4. Map of Merrimack County, New Hampshire 1892

The town of Loudon, New Hampshire is located near the northeastern edge of Merrimack County. The county is located in the central part of the state and was founded in 1823. Again, while this map was created outside of the period of time discussed in this study, it offers the visual for placing Loudon in the geographical context of New Hampshire. (Map by D.H. Hurd & Co. "Strafford County, NH." *Town and City Atlas of the State of New Hampshire*. [1892]:223. Held in the Milne Special Collections and Archives at the University of New Hampshire.)

Chapter 3: Losing Office in Loudon, 1829

The Presidential election of 1828 and the subsequent inauguration of Andrew Jackson in 1829 marked a monumental shift in the politics of both the Post Office Department and the nation as a whole. For decades the post office had been the only aspect of the national government that most citizens ever encountered, and even then they were being served by their friends, neighbors, and family members. Local citizens played a key role in choosing who was going to be their postmaster, meaning that at face value the post office would look deceptively like a supremely local venture. The election of Andrew Jackson irrevocably altered the system, redistributing governmental power over the post office from Congress to the Executive, and creating a painful reminder for the citizens of the nation that while the post office may have appeared local, it was actually the United States federal government hidden right before their eyes. This revelation in postal politics was particularly prevalent in the state of New Hampshire, and most especially in the towns of Loudon and Portsmouth.

The institution of the spoils system was arguably one of the most important legacies of Andrew Jackson's time as President, and this system was particularly potent for the post office. Author Albert Somit stressed in his article about Jackson that the guiding principles that undergirded the executive officeholder removals of the era were merit and morals. Officeholders were to be competent, upstanding individuals who were committed to the sanctity of their office for serving the common good. To the Jacksonians, officeholders appointed during the two previous administrations (Adams and Monroe) were un-Republican; they were immoral characters who used their offices for personal and party gain, meaning that they needed to be replaced by individuals who exhibited the proper Republican zeal. As Somit put it, "all federal employees who had used their 'official station' for 'selfish re-electioneering purposes' would be

removed.” The entire article portrayed Jackson in a rather complimentary light, rationalizing his motives and reasoning for effectively purging the Executive branch of any non-Democrat officeholders. Somit’s use of the term “re-electioneering” was particularly striking, as it ruled out the need to explain the lack of removals involving officers who had campaigned for Jackson. The term intones the idea that political lobbying while in office was acceptable, but that in this case the Adamsites were wrong and the Jacksonians were right.⁷² This distinction, however, did not protect everyone. One particularly notable official, the Postmaster General, was removed from his office despite his support for Andrew Jackson and the Democrats throughout the election.

Albert Somit made but a passing remark about the removal of Postmaster General John McLean, stating simply that he had been “promoted” to the Supreme Court. This was a gross oversimplification of the situation – John McLean did indeed accept a seat on the Supreme Court in 1829, but the circumstances of this move and the merit of using the term “promotion” in this situation are debatable. McLean served as the Postmaster General of the Post Office Department, as it became called during his tenure, from 1824 until 1829. Appointed by James Monroe, McLean was kept on throughout the Adams Administration, even despite his repeated political maneuverings in support of the opposition. Andrew Jackson confronted the same reason in 1829 that John Quincy Adams was never able to get rid of McLean and replace him with a more sympathetic individual: Postmaster General John McLean was an incredibly popular man who ran his department with an ardent efficiency. This fact made his removal a ticking political time bomb. Author Francis P. Weisenburger discussed McLean’s political prowess in his article “John McLean Post-master General”, saying that “by a conscientious and capable management of the post office department he [McLean] might add to the number of his friends in all parts of the

⁷² Albert Somit, “Andrew Jackson as Administrative Reformer,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1954), 214.

country, and by a policy of studied good will for those on both sides of the political question he might secure the favor of men of opposite partisan affiliations.” He was a popular public figure who harbored intense political aspirations, leading him to form diverse relationships with people across the country. These connections and McLean’s integrity ultimately became both a blessing and a curse.⁷³

John McLean walked a very thin line between remaining loyal to the Adams Administration while also currying favor with the Jacksonian movement. He kept his finger on the political pulse of the nation in order to keep abreast of the newest social and governmental trends. In this way, John McLean was able to curry favor with “men of opposite partisan affiliations.” McLean had presidential aspirations, and should Andrew Jackson have chosen not to run again in 1832 he may have actually run for Presidential office. But McLean was in fact an effective postal administrator, helping to expand the reach of the office and to improve services. By the end of the Adams Administration, however, his loyalty to the Jacksonian cause was undeniable. While he was “proclaiming repeatedly that his one aim was an impartial and conscientious administration of the affairs of his department, his primary incentive was the safeguarding of his own political fortunes, even at a sacrifice of his personal integrity.”⁷⁴ Beyond his personal political ideology, McLean was astute enough to see that the Democrats were going to win the 1828 presidential election and decided to hitch his horse to their wagon in order to improve his political odds. John Quincy Adams knew that McLean was subversively working against his administration, but was unwilling to remove him because he was too popular and far too efficient an administrator. Shortly after taking office Andrew Jackson ran into these same

⁷³ Francis P. Weisenburger, “John McLean, Postmaster-General,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 18, no. 3, (1931), 23-30.

⁷⁴ Weisenburger, 33.

issues when McLean supposedly refused to fall into line with the new administration's plans, but Jackson was able to find a way out of this situation where Adams could not.⁷⁵

Up until his removal in 1829, Postmaster General John McLean used a "public trust doctrine" in running the post office. McLean had solitary power over postmaster appointments under both Monroe and Adams, and that allowed him to build these offices into positions of trust. Men who were deemed to be honorable individuals and who were cognizant of their duties were given positions within the service. These trustworthy individuals were not paid overly well, as their compensation was based on a percentage of their offices' postage accrual, but McLean fought for them to retain their franking privileges despite Congressional attempts at curtailment. In essence, if postmasters in office faithfully executed the requirements of their job, then from 1824 until 1829 they were entitled to enjoy the perks that came with their station. McLean's approach to regulating postmasters helped to create a sense of pride in office, which helped to improve staff accountability, and yet again helped to improve McLean's personal image and consolidate his base of supporters. All the years of this garnering of support was tidily derailed, however, when Jackson appointed McLean to the Supreme Court because the Postmaster General refused to arbitrarily remove good postmasters.

During his campaign, Jackson and his supporters had enlisted a number of party publicists to popularize their view of the Adams Administration. This group came to be known as the 'Kitchen Cabinet' because they were private citizens who essentially functioned as a secondary Executive Cabinet. These individuals became responsible for 'reforming' the Executive Branch. One of the members of the Kitchen Cabinet was Duff Green, publicist of the *United States Telegraph*. Shortly after ascertaining that Jackson had won the election he

⁷⁵ Weisenburger, 26-33.

predicted that “beginning shortly after Jackson’s inauguration in March, the incoming President would “reward his friends and punish his enemies.” In order to do this, he understood that the Kitchen Cabinet would need the Postmaster General on their side. But as Historian Richard John put it in *Spreading the News*, “Though McLean had secretly backed Jackson in the election of 1828, he had no intention of permitting a mere party publicist like Green to subordinate the administration of the postal system to petty considerations of partisan gain.” In McLean’s eyes, the occasional, covert patronage appointment was one thing, but the wholesale removal of the political opposition, to the potential detriment of the service, was quite another. So in the end, something had to be done about getting rid of John McLean.⁷⁶

There was no one cohesive story about why Postmaster General John McLean became the Honorable Justice McLean, but filling the vacant seat on the Supreme Court by appointing the Postmaster General was Andrew Jackson’s eventual solution to his postal problem. This move took away McLean’s power to dole out positions as political patronage, striking a massive blow to any potential plans for a future presidential bid. But rather than saying that McLean refused to become a victim, it appears that that is exactly what he made himself out to be. Jacksonian publicist Amos Kendall, who was to become the Postmaster General himself in the mid-1830’s and was a member of the Kitchen Cabinet, claimed that McLean actually approved of the removals, but that he could not dismiss these postmasters without losing a significant portion of his national popularity. Duff Green concurred, even going so far as to claim that McLean himself had secretly agreed to give him power over the dismissals. Political opposites such as Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story and even the newly retired President John Quincy Adams agreed that McLean’s removal was not of his own doing and that it could very easily

⁷⁶ Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 78-82, 210, 211, 217.

have been the death knell of his political career. Edward Everett recounted in a letter how McLean had met with the President after refusing to remove the Postmaster of Boston, stating that he would gladly remove any partisan postmaster who had campaigned during the election, but it was to be regardless of where on the spectrum their partisan opinions fell.⁷⁷

John McLean himself always proclaimed that he had been forced out of office by the Jacksonians. He had backed them in the election, but did not believe in their dedication to manipulating public offices for partisan gain. He rather successfully portrayed himself as battling against the political machine and as the first victim of the administration's attack on the Post Office. McLean was undeniably a master at spinning a story; he managed to tread a very fine line between the Adamsite and Jacksonian camps throughout the election, and though he did eventually show his hand, his personal popularity meant that nobody could not do anything about it. He had himself appointed men to office for political patronage, though on a much smaller scale than what the Jacksonians were asking for. But the man that was chosen to replace him, William T. Barry, was totally unlike McLean. Barry did not harbor the same lofty political aspirations that McLean did, and was invited by President Jackson to sit as one of his (official) Cabinet members. Barry was an inept administrator who resigned in 1835 after an unflattering Congressional report detailed the dire financial straits into which he had steered the Post Office. Andrew Jackson and his Kitchen Cabinet made an impressively calculated move in appointing Barry because they knew that he would do their bidding. With a seat on the Presidential Cabinet, Jackson could keep a close eye on Barry to ensure that he would not deviate from the party line, effectively subjugating the Postmaster General to the President. Postmaster General John McLean was the first person to refer to the General Post Office as the Post Office Department,

⁷⁷ John, 214-215.

and the postal service did not officially become an Executive Department until an act of Congress was passed in 1872. Despite the fact that the office had been referred to as a department before Barry's appointment, and despite the fact that it would not become a department in the eyes of Congress until thirty seven years after Barry left office, this was the moment in history when the Post Office really became an Executive Department. Up until this point the service had been headed by a Postmaster General who ultimately answered to Congress, but under the leadership of William T. Barry and the Democratic Party, the Post Office became a Presidential patronage machine.⁷⁸

The last key player in this drama, Isaac Hill, actually holds our first connection between this national political squabble and life in New Hampshire. Hill was born in 1788 in Cambridge, Massachusetts as the eldest son in a family of nine. His family moved closer to the New Hampshire border when he was ten years old, and due to a childhood injury that left him crippled he was apprenticed to a newspaper publisher in Amherst, New Hampshire in 1802. In 1809, Hill moved north to Concord, New Hampshire to assume ownership of the *New-Hampshire Patriot*. Over the years the columns of his paper continually espoused his belief in the patriotism of 1775, his detestation of tyranny, and his love of Republicanism. Hill became a hard hitting political publisher who turned a failing newspaper into a local staple. He maintained a wide array of business ventures in Concord, including a mail contract that was worth between six and eight thousand dollars per year. Even when the *Patriot* lost its federal printing contract in 1827, Hill managed to retain the mail contract that allowed his paper to circulate at no expense. Despite his diverse business holdings, politics was always an integral part of Hill's life. During the election of 1828, Hill was one of the party publicists called upon by the Democrats to spread the word on

⁷⁸ *The United States Postal Service: An American History, 1775-2006* (Washington, D.C.: Government Relations, 2006), 11; John, 217.

their cause. The columns of the Patriot were already filled with Hill's own political credo, but as Richard John put it, "week in and week out, Jacksonian publicists filled the periodical press with lurid accounts of the evils that supposedly plagued the central government during the administrations of Adams and Monroe. "Executive patronage" was their bogey man and "retrenchment and reform" their rallying cry." This gave Hill's relentlessness a defined target, and he soon became the state's most outspoken voice for Jackson's campaign.⁷⁹

After Jackson's election in 1828, Isaac Hill along with fellow publicists Duff Green, Amos Kendall, and Samuel Ingham became members of the President's Kitchen Cabinet. These men were in charge of organizing the removals, of which Duff Green took point during the first few months of the administration. He soon had a falling out with his fellow Democrats, however, and the contemporary opinion was that Isaac Hill replaced Green as the administration's "hatchet man." Apparently "Hill was bent on revenge, harboring as he did a burning resentment against the Adamsites for their alleged manipulation of postal patronage in New Hampshire during the election campaign." Hill had complained in a letter to McLean that nine tenths of the postmasters in New Hampshire were not Democrats, and that these offices had originally been created for the benefit of the people, not the individual office holders. Small town postmasters who took in very little in postage but had a franking privilege held more influence in their community than any big city postmaster, making anyone of them that was not loyal to the Democratic cause a threat. New Hampshire was full of these small town postmasters, and it wasn't long before Hill became "the

⁷⁹ Donald B. Cole, *Jacksonian Democracy in New Hampshire, 1800-1851* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 3, 23, 61, 77; John, 209.

number-one spoils man in New Hampshire.” In the first year of Jackson’s Administration alone, New Hampshire saw twenty three percent of its postmasters replaced by Hill’s swift “justice.”⁸⁰

Loudon, New Hampshire was a town that exemplified this power struggle from both the federal level and the state level. Incorporated as a town in 1773, Loudon sits northeast of Concord, the state capital, and in the northeast corner of Merrimack County. The original area of the town was set off from neighboring Canterbury. Primarily a farming community, Loudon had three separate post offices by the time that Andrew Jackson was elected in 1829. A notice ran in the February 23, 1828 issue of the *New Hampshire Statesman*, informing the public that “a Post office has been established at Loudon Ridge, in this County, and John Batchelder, Esq. appointed Post Master”.⁸¹ This office would most likely have been situated inside Mr. Batchelder’s home on “the Ridge,” as it is often called by locals. Loudon Ridge runs along the northeastern border of the town. This landmark would have made travel difficult, even in the best weather, and was remote from Concord and much of the surrounding area. Though the point of reference was not given, an 1839 article for the establishment of a Christian Academy on the Ridge offered distances from the area to surrounding towns. The author noted that “this beautiful, fertile, and elevated ridge” was “by the main stage road... 3 miles distant from Gilmanton; 12 from Concord; 6 from Pittsfield; 4 from the Shakers at Canterbury; 12 from Sanbornton and 12 from Meredith.”⁸² Given the distance to other towns and the geography of the land scape, the creation of this office would have been reasonable.

⁸⁰ John, 220, 223, 225; Cole, 84, 86.

⁸¹ *New Hampshire Statesman and Register* (Concord, NH,) Feb. 23, 1828.

⁸² Joseph H. Smith, *Christian Herald and Journal* (Concord NH), Aug. 15, 1839.

Just a few miles from this area was Loudon Center, another part of town that had its own post office. This was originally the political and economic center of Loudon, where the men who were considered to be the first settlers of the town lived and where the first town meeting was held. The postmaster of this office was Mr. Ira Osgood, a farmer who periodically served as a town Selectmen. The third office, which at its inception was rather controversial, was the Loudon Village office. This office was a point of contention for those living near the Center because the Village, which was nearer to the border with Concord, had begun to take over as the social and political heart of the town. Sent in by “A Subscriber,” an article ran in the *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* informing people of the establishment of the Loudon Centre office, helmed by Osgood, to replace the Loudon office. As the article stated, “the attempts of a few very *disinterested* citizens to build up the little village in the south part of Loudon by endeavoring to deprive the people in the central and east parts of the town of their post office and to confine it to this little village, to say nothing of other manœuvres, are not quite so successful as their honors may have anticipated.”⁸³ The political center of Loudon was beginning to shift, as a new meeting house had been erected in Loudon Village only a year before. This local shift in power would have helped to reinforce the local mask that the post office wore. Small town, local politics was dictating the shape of the post office and the role that it played in this one small town, increasing service and providing access to news while also creating conflict.

The postmaster positions at the Loudon Post Offices were not lucrative, collecting very little postage and offering their postmasters very little in the way of compensation. For the year ending on March 31, 1829, the Loudon Centre office earned only \$9.86, the Loudon Ridge office

⁸³ “Communicated,” *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* (Concord, NH), Oct. 15, 1828.

earned only \$9.83, and the Loudon Village office earned \$25.31. In comparison, Portsmouth earned \$1,942.17, and the post office in the state capital of Concord earned \$618.40. While the Loudon offices would have offered a considerable improvement in the way of life for many of the town's residents, they were fairly inconsequential when it came to postage accrual.⁸⁴ They became important, however, in the new federal power struggle that took place after the inauguration of Andrew Jackson; not only one but two of the three Loudon Postmasters were removed from their offices. For Johnathan Wood and John Batchelder, their removals likely did not come as a surprise. In February 1829, *The New-Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* ran an article titled simply "Federal Postmasters." This article addressed the common complaint that people were not receiving their newspapers, which were never more important than during an election. The editor/author blamed this on the postmasters, saying that "in this State more than three fourths of the Postmasters are either federalists, or, 'what is worse and more to be deplored,' the tools of federalists." Subscribers were reassured that any postmaster who had not properly discharged their duties would soon be reported to the Postmaster General, concluding with the ominous statement that "a day of reckoning with unfaithful publick servants is at hand." This rhetoric would surely have made many postmasters in the state uneasy, including the men in Loudon. This article used newspapers as a thinly veiled threat to all non-Democrat leaning postmasters in New Hampshire.⁸⁵

The use of the word "federalist" in this article offers an interesting look at the rhetoric that was being used during the campaign in 1828 and during the early days of Andrew Jackson's administration. The word "federalist" can have two meanings: believing in a strong, centralized

⁸⁴ H.Rep. Doc. No. 21-61, at 6-7 (1830).

⁸⁵ "Federal Postmasters," *New-Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* (Concord, NH), Feb. 2, 1829.

(federal) government, or belonging to the Federalist Party. At this point in time, the Federalist Party that had governed the country during 1790's no longer existed. John Quincy Adams had actually begun his political career as a Federalist, but by 1828 had long since become a National Republican. This simply meant that he was a Republican who supported the national administration. Prior to the elections of 1824 and 1828, during the "Era of Good Feelings," America did not have a two party system. After the election of 1824 went to the House of Representatives, and Henry Clay formed an alliance with John Quincy Adams that won Adams the Presidency, Andrew Jackson's outrage helped to form the Democratic Republican Party. This would eventually be shortened to just the Democratic Party. Andrew Jackson's campaigns revived the idea of old Republicanism in the vein of Madison and Jefferson, where anti-elitist, agrarian virtue reigned supreme. This was the opposite of what the original Federalist Party had believed in, and invariably called for a reduction in the size of the federal government. This all means that, in the context of the abovementioned article and the vicious rhetoric of the election of 1828, which Historian Daniel Walker Howe proclaimed to have "probably [been] the dirtiest in American History," the word "federalist" is intended to be taken as an insult. Anyone whose political ideology leaned toward federalism, whether with a capital "F" or not, was the enemy.⁸⁶

The threats that were made in the Democratic papers soon became a reality. In May 1829 an article was published in the *New-Hampshire Patriot* about the removal of the Postmaster at Portsmouth, John F. Parrott. From 1817 until 1825, Parrott had served in Congress, first as a House Representative and then as a Senator. Parrott received his postal appointment in 1825 and according to the article, had earned \$17,600 at the people's expense. The article proclaimed that Parrott had lived far too long off of the people, without doing anything to their benefit, and that

⁸⁶ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 153, 200, 206, 204.

Abner Greenleaf righteously deserved the position. Greenleaf was an upright, virtuous citizen who had lost his teaching position, after ill treatment by Parrott and others, because he had lobbied for the Democratic cause. He had also served several years in the state legislature. The article closed by stating that “we are pleased that he [Greenleaf] has received the appointment, even if John F. Parrott is compelled to feel the effects of *rotation in office*.” The phrase “rotation in office” became the battle cry of the Jacksonians throughout the removals process. An article that had run in the same paper on April 27 named a Mr. Cushman as the Postmaster at Portsmouth, but in the end it was Abner Greenleaf who got the job. The removal of the Postmaster at Portsmouth happened early in the process of this “rotation in office,” meaning that the Postmasters at Loudon would have been able to read about the events that were unfolding less than fifty miles away, while also foreshadowing their own futures.⁸⁷

The postal purge seems to have come to Loudon in August of 1829. On August 17, the *New-Hampshire Patriot* ran a brief list of postmasters that had recently been removed. On that list was Johnathan Woods, who had been replaced as the postmaster at Loudon by Irad Brickett. The article above this list covered the progress of these postal reforms by saying that “these offices are the natural and lawful spoils of the victory – and a beaten and captured army might with the same propriety be suffered to retain their arms and munitions of war, as the federal party the important offices of the government.” A week later, in the August 24th edition of the same paper, two interesting articles ran, one to do specifically with Loudon. The first was an article that had originally been printed by the *Washington Telegraph*, and reprinted in the *Dover Gazette*. It notified the public that the papers had been authorized to inform them that any

⁸⁷ “Post Master at Portsmouth,” *New-Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* (Concord, NH), May 11, 1829; “Appointments by the President,” *New-Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* (Concord, NH), April 27, 1829.

postmaster who had deviated from “the strict line of duty” by impeding the circulation of any newspaper, or giving service to one party to the exclusion of the other, would after the presentation of “satisfactory evidence” be removed immediately, regardless of their “political professions.” On the following page an article titled “Federal Spunk” noted that the recently ousted Postmaster at Loudon “refuses to surrender the office – retaining the books, papers, keys, &c” and that “this is manifesting proper resentment.”⁸⁸ Interestingly, the keys mentioned by this article are most likely the keys kept by each postmaster in order to unlock the official portmanteau.

If we think back to Chapter One when the Post Office Act of 1792 established a number of punishments for crimes associated with the mail, the safety of all letters and newspapers carried in the mail was paramount. The official portmanteau was a leather bag that was carried from office to office with the mail locked inside. A visual example of this bag could be seen in the painting “Village Tavern,” done by John Lewis Krimmel in 1814 (See Fig. 5). This painting offered an unparalleled glimpse into the setting of many post offices during the years of the early republic and provides a rare visual of the official postal portmanteau.⁸⁹ Only postmasters had a key to the portmanteau. The postal regulation booklet published in 1828 stated that “The portmanteau key should be kept with great care, and never be carried out of the office, but kept there in a secure place, accessible only to the Postmaster, his assistant or clerk.”⁹⁰

⁸⁸ “Reform” and “New Appointments,” *New-Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* (Concord, NH), Aug. 17, 1829; “The Washington Telegraph says” and “Federal Spunk,” *New-Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* (Concord, NH), Aug. 24, 1829.

⁸⁹ Richard R. John and Thomas C. Leonard, “The Illusion of the Ordinary: John Lewis Krimmel’s Village Tavern and the Democratization of Public Life in the Early Republic,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 65, no. 1 (1998): 88-89.

⁹⁰ *Post Office Laws, Instructions, and Forms Published for the Regulation of the Post Office*, (Washington: Way & Gideon, 1828), 42.



Figure 5. "Village Tavern" By John Lewis Krimmel

This painting shows a tavern-post office in rural Pennsylvania in 1814. Elements of a small town post office can be seen in all corners of the painting, but the mail carrier entering the door on the far left is the most critical aspect of this image in regard to this chapter. The leather bag slung over the mail carrier's shoulder is the locked postal portmanteau. Only postmasters had a key, meaning that it is the portmanteau key that the postmaster at Loudon was unwilling to give up after his removal. (Painting by John Lewis Krimmel. "Village Tavern." [1814]. Painting held in the collection at the Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio; Picture from the National Postal Museum, Washington D.C.)

Given the notice of Johnathan Wood's removal in the August 17th paper, and the lack of any mention of Postmaster John Batchelder's removal, this article would appear to refer to Johnathan Wood. The post office may have had a space in Mr. Wood's house, meaning that he could not literally give up the keys to the office. He would instead have been giving up the keys to the portmanteau. The books and papers that were also referenced in this article likely refer to the vast amounts of paperwork that the postmaster had to fill out. Some of these forms were discussed in Chapter Two, such as the forms that recorded the destination and cost of each letter that came into or left an office. The position of the postmaster was one of public trust, a trust that had been given to Johnathan Wood and the many hundreds of other postmasters who were removed during Andrew Jackson's time as President. It is understandable that Mr. Wood did not want to just give up the keys or books that had been entrusted to him as a measure of keeping the mail safe.

One of the most important purposes of these articles was to keep the public up-to-date on the progress of the removals, while also continuing to garner support for Jackson's new mass party. These papers made the Democratic cause seem righteous and moral, and by October 1829 the list of removals had continued to grow. In the Political column of the October 31 *New-Hampshire Statesman* the list of proscribed postmasters in New Hampshire ran under an article that had been taken from the *New-York Statesman*. The article charged that Andrew Jackson had risen upon his public popularity, despite "the blots upon his escutcheon" and that John Quincy Adams had been relegated to private life, despite his political services. Jackson espoused the idea that the people wanted change, and as such "the work of reform has been carried to an unprecedented extent. It has been felt in every State, and reached almost every village." The following list of proscriptions listed John F. Parrott of Portsmouth, Johnathan Wood of "Loudon

Mills,” and John Batchelder of Loudon Ridge as the “Punished.” Abner Greenleaf, Irad Brickett, and Lewis Flanders were listed as the “Rewarded.” The list included forty five offices, several of which had been newly created. The same list was published just a few weeks later in the *Portsmouth Journal and Rockingham Gazette* though without the introductory article. This list included forty four offices; the author excluded one of the newly created offices. In total, New Hampshire was the second hardest hit state during these removals from office. In a report submitted to Congress by Postmaster General William T. Barry, New Hampshire experienced the “rotation in office” of fifty-five postmasters between March 4, 1829 and March 22, 1830. Four hundred and ninety one postmasters had been removed in a little over a year, and New Hampshire was second only to New York where one hundred and thirty one postmasters were removed. This means that eleven percent of the postmasters that were removed from office during the first year of Andrew Jackson’s Presidency were from New Hampshire. Concord publicist Isaac Hill’s involvement in the Kitchen Cabinet likely helped to catapult New Hampshire into the number two spot; in contrast, the same report stated that Massachusetts, home of John Quincy Adams and a state that was significantly larger than New Hampshire, only had twenty eight postmasters removed. Needless to say, the Jacksonian Administration wasted no time in “punishing their enemies” and “rewarding their friends.”⁹¹

In a country with some eight thousand postmasters, four hundred and ninety one removals was a very small percentage of the number of office holders. In New Hampshire, however, the number of removals was significantly higher. Loudon experienced the “rotation” of two of its three postmasters, and Portsmouth, the biggest office in the state, received a new postmaster as well. The town of Durham was not affected by these purges, but the story that

⁹¹ “Political,” *New-Hampshire Statesman* (Concord, NH), Oct. 31, 1829; “The Proscription List,” *Portsmouth Journal and Rockingham Gazette*, (Portsmouth NH), Nov. 7, 1829; S. Report No. 21-90, (1830).

these offices tell marks a new chapter in the political history of the post office. Up until 1829, Congress had had ultimate control over postal affairs. Issues had revolved mostly around post roads and the expansion of service, leading the department to take on a uniquely local appearance. The local post office was the only contact that most citizens ever had with the national government, but throughout this federal exposure they were reading local newspapers and interacting with friends, neighbors, and relatives. Citizens would have occasionally sent petitions to Congress in order to establish new post offices and to designate new post roads, as the residents of Loudon doubtless did on multiple occasions, but Congress was a far away, abstract body of politicians in Washington. The postal purges that began in 1829 were, at a local level, a potent reminder of the power of the national government in Washington. On the federal level, the actions of the Jackson Administration shifted the power dynamic for control of the post office. The Postmaster General was still the figure head of the service, but the President now dictated what he did and how he acted, not Congress. With the installment of the Postmaster General as a member of the Executive Cabinet, and especially with the appointment of William T. Barry, the Postmaster General became subservient to the President. The United States Post Office Department, the largest federal employer in the country until the railroad boom, had been transformed from a Congressional dependent into an Executive political tool.

Conclusion: The Postal Present and a Possible Future

To pull a thread that began in the introduction all the way through to now, postage held enormous power during the early years of the Post Office Department. Post roads not only helped to shape the growing country, but they also helped shape the power structure of the state and federal governments. Postmasters represented not only the post office but the entire federal government in countless towns and villages across the United States. The post office played a critical role both in shaping national politics and in shaping the way that every day citizens interacted with government. In essence, the post office was the government.

This power dynamic was seen very clearly in three different communities in the State of New Hampshire. By looking at Portsmouth during the period of debate on the Post Office Act of 1792, the establishment of federal power over state interests became clear. The federal legislators chose the business interests of the Portsmouth merchants over the state political interests that were embodied by the town of Exeter, which was the state capital, when they chose where to designate post roads. During the first two decades of the nineteenth century the Post Office expanded rapidly across the growing country, spurred by Congress' carte blanche approval of post roads. The Postmaster General was left to implement and finance these roads, a Herculean task that dropped the Postmaster General into an unsavory position. The town of Durham offers an intriguing look at how this expansion was paid for. An older office within the State of New Hampshire, postage collected in Durham helped to subsidize the expansion of service across the state of New Hampshire. The Durham office, in its own small way, helped the Postmaster General out from in between a rock and a hard place. Another aspect of postal politics and structure becomes apparent by studying the Durham office in that postmasters, the primary link between individual communities and their national government, effectively helped to hide the

entirety of the federal structure. These postmasters were federal employees, indeed, but they were also farmers, merchants, friends, and family. Their role as the postmaster was never their primary occupation, meaning that the involvement of the federal government in everyday life was powerfully obscured.

The final community that was examined, Loudon, offered a potent backdrop for the events that unfolded after the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828. The Jackson Administration fundamentally altered the structure of the postal service by implementing a system of political patronage for jobs and by making the Postmaster General a member of the President's Cabinet. This officially made the Postmaster General directly answerable to the President, not to Congress, and made the hiring process based more on political affiliation than ability. Loudon was severely impacted by the Jacksonian policy of removing any postmasters who did not support the Democratic cause, meaning that two of the three postmasters in town were removed. These men would have known what was about to happen, and one even tried to resist this change by refusing to give up the key objects related to his office. In the end, however, the effects of this episode in postal history reached far into the future.

The election of Andrew Jackson in 1828 marked a long lasting shift in the way that the post office did business. The Jackson administration formally installed the patronage system as a key aspect of the postal hiring process, something that would plague the service well into the twentieth century. With the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970, the Post Office Department was transformed into the United States Postal Service that we know today. Often abbreviated simply to USPS, the new service was formulated on the model of a federal corporation. Politics were taken out of the equation when it came to hiring, and the Postmaster General is no longer a member of the President's Cabinet (Kitchen or official). Congress passed the legislation that

officially reformed postal operations, but the Service is now primarily run by a Board of Governors.⁹² But politics isn't the only issue that the Post Office has grappled with for more than two centuries; finances have always been another issue that the postal service has struggled with. This was true during the early nineteenth century, when Congress continually approved post routes that could not possibly be self-sustaining, and it continues to be an issue for the USPS in the twenty first century as well.

The latest dilemma that the postal service faces is the prospect of privatization. One of the major arguments for this newest iteration of the postal service is the state of its finances. One of the causes of these financial woes is a 2006 law that mandates that the Postal Service pre-fund employee retirement health benefit plans. As the Office of Inspector General for the Postal Service was quoted in an 2018 Washington Post article, this piece of legislation is similar to a credit card company saying, "You will charge a million dollars on your credit card in your life; please include the million dollars in your next payment."⁹³ As a result of this policy and other operational issues, the organization has fallen deeply into debt. To explore possible solutions to these problems, a task force was created in April 2018 that has subsequently offered recommendations for overhauling the service. The primary suggestion has been to transform the current United States Postal Service, which is a federal corporation, into a private corporation.

This move would allow the service to cut costs by delivering the mail less frequently, delivering to select centralized locations, and to allow the service to institute a more fiscally responsible business plan. The possibility of privatization presents a host of problems, but

⁹² United States Postal Service, "The United States Postal Service: An American History, 1775-2006, Pub. 100, Washington D.C.: Government Relations, 2007, 4-5.

⁹³ Katrina vanden Heuvel, "Trump's privatization plan would destroy the Postal Service", Opinions, *The Washington Post*, August 7, 2018.

arguably the most important is that it would inevitably severely limit service to rural communities where it would not be fiscally reasonable to “extend the posts”. The postal system was built on a model of service, connecting citizens in the largest cities to the citizens establishing the most rugged frontier towns. For more than two hundred years, the Post Office has been a primary example of universal (postal) service. Widely diffused information helped to make a republican form of government possible, and the privatization of the system would severely undermine that principle of service. Politics and power have always been hurdles to the operation of the postal service, and financing a system that connects countless citizens across a diverse nation has always been a challenge. Even just a forty year cross section of the over two hundred year history of the postal service shows that issues of power and money have plagued the Post Office since the very beginning, but the principle of service for all has always driven operations.

As we begin to look to the future of the United States Postal Service, it is important to remember the history that has brought the Post Office to where it is today. As the inscription on the General Post Office at 8th Avenue and 33rd Street in New York City reads, “Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.”⁹⁴ Those aforementioned rounds should include all American citizens, living in every corner of the country, and neither politics nor finances should ever change that standard of service.

⁹⁴ “The United States Postal Service”, 84.

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This bibliography has been split into sections for ease of use. The sources have been split between primary and secondary sources, and each of these categories has been further broken down into smaller groups based on the type of source and where the source was found. URLs have been provided for resources that were used digitally.

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